The New Criterion

February 1999

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: February 1999

Only the life of the mind

The University of Chicago, founded in 1892 by John D. Rockefeller, long had the reputation of being one of the most serious undergraduate colleges in the country. Students who applied to Chicago knew about its socially inhospitable reputation. What other university would tear down its football stadium to make way for a new library? If students nevertheless chose Chicago, they did so because what they wanted most from college was not recreation but education. The core curriculum put into place in the 1930s by Robert Maynard Hutchins, president and then chancellor of the university, was among the most rigorous "Great Books" programs in the country. "The result," as the sociologist Edward Shils observed in a memoir about Hutchins, "was an atmosphere of extraordinary exhilaration among students and teachers. . . . The students responded to this mode of teaching . . . with the enthusiasm which comes from the sense of doing something of intrinsic importance."

Readers will note that we use the past tense. In this relativistic age, when the very idea of "intrinsic importance" is widely ridiculed, it is hardly surprising that serious attention to the liberal arts should be an early casualty of fashion. And so it has been at the University of Chicago. This is not news. The quality and tenor of education at Chicago have been declining for years. But word of these developments seems finally to have penetrated the sanctum of *The New York Times*. Like the man who chanced upon an elephant for the first time and then rushed about to disseminate news of his extraordinary discovery, the *Times* last December 28 ran a front page article informing its readers that "Winds of Academic Change Rustle University of Chicago." Imagine! The *Times* reported that "with colleges today increasingly viewed as employment credentialing stations, students as customers and learning for its own sake as a quaint idea whose time has passed, the University of Chicago finds itself a victim of its own high-mindedness and in a painful identity crisis."

So what else is new? One of the main issues currently confronting the University of Chicago is the dilution of its required core curriculum from twenty-one required courses down to fifteen or eighteen, depending on which revisionist wins out. But it was not so long ago that virtually the entire course of undergraduate study at the University of Chicago was mapped out ahead of time for its students. As a friend of ours who attended the university in its heyday recalled after reading the article in the *Times*: "When someone asked Hutchins

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why there weren't electives for undergraduates at the University of Chicago, he patiently explained that if we knew enough to determine what we should be taught, we shouldn't be students."

In fact, the same things are happening—and have been happening for some time—to the University of Chicago as have happened to liberal arts education elsewhere in the country. At the top, there is a crisis of leadership, well exemplified by a statement, quoted in the *Times*, made by Hugo F. Sonnenschein, the University of Chicago's current president. "Chicago has a special role and responsibility because it has a reputation as embodying what a great university should be. But the commodification and marketing of higher education are unmistakable today, and we can't jolly dance along and not pay attention to them." Once upon a time, of course, one would look to the president of a distinguished university to provide intellectual leadership—that is, to *resist* pressures to trivialize and cheapen the integrity of the university's educational offerings and jolly well dance to a different drummer.

Higher education cannot be a popularity contest without compromising its very essence: to strive for the best. When top university administrators start using words like "commodification" and "marketing," the game is up. They might as well be in the business of selling widgets. Accordingly, as part of its effort to increase the university's "market share," administrators plan to increase the undergraduate enrollment by some 35 percent, to 4,500 students. Never mind that the University of Chicago has trouble attracting enough qualified students to fill the places currently available. The *Times* article quoted several observations by Michael C. Behnke, a new vice president "hired to improve marketing and recruitment." (He is also described as "the vice-president in charge of enrollment.") "I don't know how many students we can attract if we go after those who only seek the life of the mind," Mr. Behnke said. "Kids aren't sure they can lead a balanced life here. My job is to convince them that they are not joining a monastery." He added later: "We are in a culture of choice, of doing your own thing." Why then have any requirements at all? Doubtless the university's students—we mean its "customers," its "consumers"—would prefer a diet of continual entertainment (what the *Times* called "expanding its recreation and service areas"). Why not give them what they want? After all, they are paying for it.

The quoted statements from Chicago's new vice president for enrollment exemplify what happens when commercial concerns trump education principles. But this isn't the only thing wrong with Chicago today. Like many other institutions, its crisis of leadership and its wholesale pandering to commercial pressures are supplemented by an ideologically driven intellectual frivolity. Hence even at the University of Chicago, supposedly a bastion of tradition, we find that one can major in such pseudo-disciplines as "media/cinema studies" and "gender studies." There is even a new Center for Gender Studies whose director, *mirabile dictu*, was quoted as saying she supported cutting the core curriculum further so that students had more time for "new fields of inquiry" like . . . well, like gender studies. We tend to feel about academic disciplines with the word "studies" in their titles the way that George Orwell said he felt about saints: that they should be considered guilty until proven innocent. With "gender studies" the presumption is not even necessary, since it has consistently proven itself to be little more than a haven for radical feminist claptrap.

It is difficult not to feel a special sadness about what is happening at the University of Chicago. For although it has long since

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ceased being the bastion of traditional rigor its enthusiasts like to remember, it has until recently done a better job than many institutions at resisting the philistine and ideological attacks that have undermined many educational institutions. We deeply sympathize, therefore, with Ken White, a twenty-one-year-old, fourth-year student at the university who lamented: "This is one of the very last places that has a rigorous curriculum. It's a test case. If you lose Chicago, I don't know what you'll have left."

Below the fold

Of course, colleges and universities are not the only institutions in our culture that seem to be in a race to render themselves ever more trivial and superficial. There are also various dispensers of news and comment—*The New York Times*, to take one prominent example. Like many others, we have often had occasion to reflect on what has happened to the *Times* in recent years: the blurring of the traditional distinction between news reporting and blatant editorializing, the shocking poverty of its cultural coverage, the subjection of nearly every aspect of the paper to an obsession with "lifestyle" and so-called human interest stories. We believed—foolishly, as it turned out—that we had inured ourselves to the worst that the *Times* could deliver. But as the old adage has it, if you can say "This is the worst," then worse is yet to come. And so it was to be with the *Times*. Many readers will have their own catalogue of fatuous stories that have appeared on the front page of our Paper of Record. It constitutes an embarrassment of . . . well, an embarrassment, anyway. But even we were not prepared for the front-page story, complete with color photograph, called "Two Experts Do Battle Over Potty Training." The President of the United States was being impeached; Russia was sinking further into chaos; most of Europe was in the process of transforming itself into a German colony; but the *Times* devotes a large portion of its front-page (and half an inside page) to rival theories about toilet training. There was some poetic justice, perhaps, in the fact that this story appeared below the fold, but above the fold a long story about rumors that the basketball player Michael Jordan was set to retire competed heartily with genuinely newsworthy items. (When Mr. Jordan finally did announce his retirement, he got the sort of front-page treatment formerly reserved for major bank crashes or mid-level political assassinations.) Which is worse, the politicization of the *Times* or its trivialization? The story about potty training showed that all bets are off.

From the archives of academic publishing:

"*Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self and the Other*
In *Queer in Russia* Laurie Essig examines the formation of gay identity and community in the former Soviet Union. As a sociological field worker she began her research during the late 1980s, before any kind of a public queer identity existed in that country. After a decade of conducting interviews, as well as observing and analyzing plays, books, pop music, and graffiti, Essig presents the first sustained study of how and why there was no Soviet gay community or even gay identity before *perestroika* and the degree to which this situation has—or has not—changed."

A lead item in the "General Interest" section of the Spring 1999 list from Duke University Press.

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The betrayal of liberalism: VI

Liberals & totalitarianism

by Robert Conquest

A liberal is, by definition, one whose aim is the furtherance of ever greater political liberty, freedom of thought, and social justice. A number of those who thought of themselves as, and were thought of as, liberals became apologists for Stalinist or similar regimes whose most notable characteristics were extreme terror, narrow dogmatism, social oppression, and economic failure. That is, they were all that the liberal tradition opposed. How, and why, did a number of liberals explicitly, and a large swathe of liberaldom implicitly, overcome this objection? How did this apparent paradox come to pass? Why in the 1930s and later do we find a sort of general infection of the atmosphere in which much of the intelligentsia moved? Even apart from those who became more or less addicted to Communism, there was also a stratum that usually gave the Soviet Union and such regimes some moral advantage over the West.

First, of course, we should say that there were many liberals—and in general many on the left—who kept their principles unsullied, and were often among the strongest opponents of the Communist despotisms. Liberal is, indeed, a vague term. Many of us would take a "liberal" position on some issues, a "conservative" one on others—as most of the American or British people in fact do (an attitude shared by the present writer).

These two vaguely differentiated attitudes are the poles within the normal development, or balance, of a civic or consensual society. But all those with reasonably critical intelligence, whether "conservative" or "liberal" on other issues, were hostile to the USSR. Those who supported it unreservedly were Communists, those who excused it may have thought of themselves as liberals, but to that extent they degraded the term.

The phenomenon we deal with here is what Orwell called "renegade liberalism." He defined these renegade liberals with characteristic felicity, in the unused preface to *Animal Farm*, as those who hold that "democracy" can only be defended by discouraging or suppressing independent thought. His immediate concern was that "where the USSR and its policies are concerned one cannot expect intelligent criticism or even, in many cases, plain honesty from liberal writers and journalists who are under no direct pressure to falsify their opinions." Elsewhere (in "The Prevention of Literature"), he comments, "When one sees highly educated men looking on indifferently at oppression and persecution, one wonders which to despise more, their cynicism or their shortsightedness." And, he felt obliged to add, "it is the liberals who fear liberty and intellectuals who want to do dirt on the intellect."

We can trace the roots of this aberration a long way back. Even before the First World War, L. T. Hobhouse in his classic *Liberalism* had written, "liberty without equality is a name of noble sound and squalid meaning."

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"Equality" is a slippery word. In a general sense we may allow that genuine liberals —and others—are committed to a society of equal citizens. The liberal state may have a legitimate role in redressing poverty, making health care available, and so forth, but after a point we find that the Liberté and Egalité that proved incompatible in the 1790s are still awkward companions. And, as the liberal attitude became more and more concerned with the use of political power to promote equality, it tended to become less and less concerned with the liberty side until, even domestically (in Thomas Sowell's words), "the grand delusion of contemporary liberals is that they have both the right and the ability to move their fellow creatures around like blocks of wood—and that the end results will be no different than if people had voluntarily chosen the same actions."

And when these liberals looked abroad they found a regime that claimed to have the same aims—and used the same, or much the same, vocabulary. If anything, from a sceptic's point of view, the Communists overdid it (with the result that any country nowadays calling itself a People's Republic or a Democratic Republic is known at once to be a ruthless dictatorship).

A dramatization of the results of reasonable men misunderstanding unreasonable men who use the same terminology is provided by the French Revolution. La Harpe, the only eventual survivor, tells a story of a dinner held early in 1788, at which all the guests were leading intellectuals opposed to Church and State and longing for the reorganization of society in the "revolution" that would bring in "the rule of reason." One of those present, Cazotte, an adept of the Illuminati, claimed to have the gift of prophecy. He told them that the revolution was, indeed, almost on them. They jokingly asked what would happen to them under the new regime. Condorcet, Cazotte replied, would die in prison of poison he had taken to cheat the executioner. "What has that to do with philosophy and the reign of reason?" "It is just what I told you, it is in the name of philosophy, of humanity, and liberty. It is under the reign of reason that you will come to such an end." Chamfort, Cazotte went on,

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would cut his veins with twenty-two slashes of the razor, but would fail to die for some months; Vicq-d'Azyr, on the other hand, would succeed in a similar act. De Nicolai would die on the scaffold, Bailly too, and Malesherbes, and Roucher. . .

> "Then we will be subjugated by the Turks and the Tartars?"
> "Not at all . . . I have told you: those who will treat you thus will all be philosophers, and will have at every moment on their lips all the same phrases that you have been using for an hour, and will be repeating all your maxims."

By the time six years had passed, every word had been fulfilled.

Of course, La Harpe's story, though both his prerevolutionary and revolutionary facts were true, was a *jeu d'esprit*—if *jeu* is the right word. And at least Cazotte and the others had no previous evidence to go on,

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and, it may be thought, atoned for their misperceptions by their deaths. Our own renegade liberals rejected years of evidence and ran little risk when their errors were exposed. And, it is perhaps worth adding, in certain areas the Communist regimes did not even pretend to match a number of liberal attitudes. Communists in fact despised liberals, even if not quite as much as they despised social-democrats. It was in his pro-Communist period that W. H. Auden wrote:

> Because you saw but were not indignant
> The invasion of the great malignant
> Cambridge ulcer
> That army intellectual
> Of every kind of liberal,
> Smarmy with friendship but of all
> There are none falser.

"Rotten liberalism" was, of course the conventional charge made by the Soviet Communists against those insufficiently ruthless in the repression of enemies of the people.

Moreover, Lenin's own interest in the overthrow of the existing order was so intense that he did not spread his progressivism into any other fields, and had nothing but contempt for modern art, free love, unorthodox medicine, and all the other paraphernalia. Communist artistic principles—socialist realism and so forth—remained overtly hostile to all the modernisms dear to many liberal hearts. Their attitude to homosexuality, at least after its criminalization in the USSR in 1935, was contrary to an important component of the liberal world view—but Moscow did not even lose the allegiance of homosexuals like Guy Burgess. The Soviets suppressed and maligned all the psychological views, Freudian and other, dear to Western intellectuals. And Stalin's extreme anti-Semitism in the post-World War II years ran against anything describable as liberal.

But, some liberals felt, at least the Stalinists were not capitalists, not motivated by greed, which, taken as the defining quality of the economic system in the West, was thus the most detested of all vices for certain liberals. These were, in general, those who gained their income (and were highly competitive with rivals for it) in academic or media spheres, that is, money derived from, but not directly dependent on, "capitalism."

Greed, it might be argued, is not as bad as mass murder. But in any case greed was equally prevalent in the mass murder societies. Corruption of every possible type has flourished in all the Communist countries. But it is not only that the USSR, for example, became a vast kleptocracy, it is also the case that even the supposedly pristine early revolutionaries were anything but immune. In fact, with few exceptions the victorious Bolsheviks lived very comfortably through the deprivations of the post-revolutionary period. Milovan Djilas, then a Yugoslav Communist leader, was shocked at how his victorious partisans, on entering Belgrade, seized villas, cars, women, and so on. The same was, of course, noted of the Sandinistas when they entered Managua.

I shall here deal with the attitude of our renegade liberals to the actual Communist regimes. There were, of course, other aspects of the affliction, such as liberal collaboration in a whole array of Communist front organizations. Nor do I propose, even as to the liberal involvement with Stalin's USSR and its successors, to give more than some illustrations of (and comments on) the theme, enough for our purpose. Readers seeking more exhaustive treatment are referred to Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims* and to a chapter in Jasper Becker's *The Hungry Ghosts*.

The phenomenon of renegade liberalism arose in the early days of the Soviet regime. Lincoln Steffens, the fearless journalist exposer of American corruption, famously said of the USSR, "I have seen the future and it works." He had seen nothing and that future didn't work. But until the 1930s the Sovietophiles were a minority among liberals. It is in 1933 that we see a real swing in leftish opinion. The terror-famine early that

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year, in which millions died, had been widely and accurately reported in much of the Western press. But the Soviet government simply denied that any famine had taken place. President Kalinin spoke of "political cheats who offer to help the starving Ukraine," commenting: "only the most decadent classes are capable of producing such cynical elements."

This Soviet story was supported—as we now know for disreputable reasons—by reporters like Walter Duranty. There were thus two versions available to the American liberals. But it was Duranty who received the Pulitzer Prize—for "dispassionate, interpretive reporting of the news from Russia." The announcement of the prize added to this citation the points that Duranty's despatches were "marked by scholarship, profundity, impartiality, sound judgement, and exceptional clarity," being "excellent examples of the best type of foreign correspondence." *The Nation*, citing him in its annual "honor roll," described his as "the most enlightening, dispassionate and readable despatches from a great nation in the making which appeared in any newspaper in the world."

A banquet was given at the Waldorf Astoria late in 1933 to celebrate the recognition of the USSR by the United States. A list of names was read, each politely applauded by the guests until Walter Duranty's was reached; then, Alexander Woollcott wrote in *The New Yorker*, "the only really prolonged pandemonium was evoked. . . . Indeed, one got the impression that America, in a spasm of discernment, was recognizing both Russia and Walter Duranty." This scene in the Waldorf was clearly a full dress appearance of the liberal establishment. And all this was *before* Stalin and his Comintern had given up their overt hostility to social democrats and liberals, and moved over to a popular front.

The next events involving the Soviet regime that demanded the attention of the international community were the Spanish Civil War and, overlapping it, the great public trials in Moscow. On Spain the Republican side strongly engaged the support of the whole liberal community (who were barely informed of the Communist terror against leftwing dissidents in Catalonia and elsewhere). As Julian Symons, himself from the far left, was to write:

> their attitude towards the Soviet Union, their belief in what was incredible and their savage treatment of unbelievers, was the blackest betrayal of their own integrity. One must make a distinction here. The impulse that prompted the intelligentsia to support the Spanish Republican cause, whether heroically or absurdly manifested, was a generous one. They could not be aware of the deceits practiced upon them . . . nor did most of them realize for some time that they were pawns, used deliberately not for Spanish but for Russian ends. But the impulse that led them to express faith in the Soviet Union after the Moscow Trials had no better motive than self-preservation. Twitch away this blanket of belief, and they would be left naked and shuddering to face the winter wind of reality. It would be pointless to put down in detail the monstrous incongruities that they willingly swallowed, pointless because these arguments have been rehearsed so many times, and also because they are arguments no longer. . . . They had not been deceived. In relation to the Soviet Union they had deceived themselves, and in the end one has to pay bitterly for such self-deceits.

There were plenty of liberal, and other leftwing, dissenters from this swallowing of

The phenomenon of renegade liberalism arose in the early days of the Soviet regime. Lincoln Steffens famously said of the USSR, *"I have seen the future and it works." He had seen nothing and that future didn't work.*

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the Soviet story. But the West, as Koestler wrote of London, was full of "thousands of painters and writers and doctors and lawyers and debutantes chanting a diluted version of the Stalinist line."

This stance was interrupted for a year or two (as well it might have been) by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but it revived after 1941. This liberal intelligentsia has been best described in the Australian poet James McAuley's account of the local variant:

> During the Thirties and Forties Australian intellectual life became subjected to an alarming extent to the magnetic field of Communism. All sorts of people who would regard themselves as being non-Communist, and even opposed to Communism, in practice were dominated by the themes and modes of discussion proposed by the Communists, danced to the Communist tune, and had serious emotional resistance to being identified with any position or institution which was denounced by the Communists as "reactionary."

He adds that

> one reason for all this was that schools of thought genuinely independent of and opposed to Communist suggestion were in this country not well organized and publicly present. They lacked prestige, and the magical aura which captures the minds of the young in advance of argument and establishes compelling fashions.

(It was a much and still, though wrongly, admired Australian historian, Manning Clark, who wrote that Lenin was "Christ-like, at least in his compassion," and was "as excited and lovable as a little child.")

From the start, it was not only the occasional corrupt journalist like Walter Duranty, but also a veritable Fronde of academics who were at least equally responsible for mediating the Soviet phenomena for the Western liberal intelligentsia. It would be supererogatory to present all the horrors of expert academe. Most notorious, of course, were the deans of Western social science, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who went to Russia, saw the system, and produced what purported to be a learned tome on the subject—*Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?*—which in its second edition, at the height of the Terror, dropped the question mark.

Their massive exercise in drivel was largely based on believing Soviet official documents. They were, in effect, taken in above all by Potemkin paperwork—of elections, trade unions, cooperatives, statistics, all the documents of the phantom USSR.[1]

Many others followed, such as Harold Laski, professor of political science at the London School of Economics and at one point Chairman of the Labour Party. When Sir Bernard Pares, the West's leading "Russianist," arrived in Russia, his previous anti-Soviet feelings evaporated. As his son admiringly put it, he "had not left the Moscow railway station before his mind was flooded with the realization that the Bolsheviks were, after all, Russia." He, Laski, the Webbs, and others, all pronounced the show trials genuine exercises in truth and legality.

These were, indeed, individuals. The academic world, though liberal in a general way, was not as yet a scene of organized error on the Communist regime. That came later, and in particular in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The Potemkin phenomenon proper—the presentation of faked appearances of prosperity or social triumphs—was, of course, widespread in all the Communist countries. Anyone who ever visited the Exhibition of Economic Achievements in Moscow will know the score. But the record is hardly believable. In 1933 the leading French liberal ("Radical") Edouard Herriot, twice premier of his country, was in Kiev. The day before his arrival the population was required to

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1 For a full exposé, see my books *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford 1990) and *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (Oxford 1986).

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work from two in the morning cleaning the streets and decorating the houses. Food-distribution centers were closed. Queues were prohibited. Homeless children, beggars, and starving people disappeared. Shop windows were filled with food, but the police dispersed and even arrested local citizens who pressed too close (and the purchase of the food was forbidden). The streets were washed, the hotel he was to stay in was refurbished with new carpets and furniture and new uniforms for the staff. Similarly, when Vice President Henry Wallace, on a flight from America to China, was for a few days in the midst of the frightful Kolyma labor camps, the guard towers and barbed wires were torn down, the miserable prisoners replaced by strong and healthy NKVD men, and so on.

Many such stories could be told. Yet the most extraordinary are those representing the Soviet penal system as humane and progressive. The facts about the Gulag were already available in a number of firsthand accounts. But, entirely for deceiving the Western liberals, the Stalinists maintained some "model prisons"—in particular one at Bolshevo where Dr. J. L. Gillin, a former president of the American Sociological Society, noted that

> In accordance with the spirit of the Revolution the terms current in capitalist penology are discarded. There are no "crimes"; there are "wrongs." . . . There is no "punishment," only "measures of social defence."

One liberal visitor, Jerzy Gliksman, a progressive member of the Warsaw City Council, was thus deceived, but later experienced the real Soviet penal behavior—described in his striking memoirs of the Gulag. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes of Havana two generations later, there were delegates living "in the hotels for foreigners who had no idea that the energy and water supply in the working quarters had broken down during the afternoon, that bread was rationed, and that the population had to stand for two hours in line for a slice of pizza; meanwhile the tourists in their hotel rooms were arguing about Lukacs."

Indeed, deception was hardly necessary.

A Communist once told me his method. First you explain to a Christian sympathizer that Communism is compatible with Christianity. That accomplished, you explain that Christianity is not compatible with Communism.

Thus Leon Feuchtwanger, the German novelist, wrote:

> The air which one breathes in the West is stale and foul . . . one comes from this oppressive atmosphere of a counterfeit democracy and hypocritical humanism into the invigorating atmosphere of the Soviet Union. Here there is no hiding behind mystical, meaningless slogans, but a sober ethic prevails.

Even the actual optic nerves of Western viewers seem to have become distorted, with falsehood coming from both outside and inside. As Malcolm Muggeridge noted:

> There were earnest advocates of the humane killing of cattle who looked up at the massive headquarters of the OGPU with tears of gratitude in their eyes, earnest advocates of proportional representation who eagerly assented when the necessity for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat was explained to them, earnest clergymen who walked reverently through anti-God museums and reverently turned the pages of atheistic literature, earnest pacifists who watched delightedly tanks rattle across the Red Square and bombing planes darken the sky, earnest town planning specialists who stood outside overcrowded ramshackle tenements and muttered: "If only

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> we had something like this in England!" The almost unbelievable credulity of these mostly university-educated tourists astonished even Soviet officials used to handling foreign visitors.

Orwell noted in Britain that "The endless executions in the purges of 1936–38 were applauded by lifelong opponents of capital punishment, and it was considered equally proper to publicize famines when they happened in India and to conceal them when they happened in the Ukraine." Similarly, the American Eugene Lyons records the admiration of *Soviet* industrialization expressed by "a couple of California back-to-nature, hand-loom faddists."

We need not trace this syndrome through all its extravagances though we should not neglect such comments as the highly respectable Dr. Ralph Abernathy on the fearful East German regime (quoted by Paul Hollander): "Every minute of my stay in your wonderful country was filled with joy and valuable political experience. I go back to my country the richer for having learned to know and appreciate the German Democratic Republic." Similarly Scott Nearing, the American social critic, on his visit found that East Germany was governed wholly without coercion.

It was not only the data that received such treatment, but even Stalinist personalities. The French progressive novelist Romain Rolland described secret police chief Genrikh Yagoda (later shot) as sensitive and intellectual. Harold Laski had a long discussion with Vyshinsky, faker of show trials, whom he found "a man whose passion was law reform. . . . He was doing what an ideal Minister of Justice would do if we had such a person in Great Britain." Vice President Henry Wallace later described Beria's terror-henchman in the Soviet Far East, Gogglidze, as "a very fine man, very efficient, gentle and understanding with people." Owen Lattimore saw I. F. Nikishov, the head of the most murderous camp system in the Gulag, as having "a trained and sensitive interest in art and music and also a deep sense of civic responsibility."

H. G. Wells arrived in Moscow in 1934 full of hostility to Communism and to Stalin. An interview changed that. Stalin, it is true, "looked past me rather than at me," but "not evasively." He asked Wells's permission to smoke his pipe, and in this and other ways soon allayed Wells's hostility.

> I have never met a man more candid, fair and honest, and to these qualities it is, and nothing occult and sinister, that he owes his tremendous undisputed ascendancy in Russia. I had thought before I saw him that he might be where he was because men were afraid of him but I realize that he owes his position to the fact that no one is afraid of him and everybody trusts him.

Even Franklin Roosevelt—deceived indeed by Harold Ickes—was charmed by Stalin into speaking of his being above all "get-at-able": the great British Russianist Ronald Hingley commented that "ungetatability" was one of Stalin's central characteristics.

Among the most egregious of what I hope I may be excused as calling the Kremlin-creepers was a number of those who would have been called liberal Christians. One might have expected a certain alienation from Communism by any of them that had read Lenin's virulent condemnation of all religion, but particularly of sophisticated religion. The active persecution of religion in the Communist countries might, you would also think, have also had an effect. But to take only one example—the World Council of Churches Central Committee's meeting in 1973 passed a resolution deploring oppression in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, the USA, and elsewhere. An attempt by a Swedish clergyman to add the Communist countries was defeated 91 to 3, with 26 abstentions.

Here again, the committment has often been so strong that it is hard to imagine that complete conversion to Communism has not taken place. A Communist once told me his method. First you explain to a

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Christian sympathizer that Communism is compatible with Christianity. That accomplished, you explain that Christianity is not compatible with Communism.

Sherwood Eddy, American churchman, and YMCA leader typically wrote:

> Russia has achieved what has hitherto been known only at rare periods of history, the experience of almost a whole people living under a unified philosophy of life. All life is focused in a central purpose. It is directed to a single high end and energized by such powerful and glowing motivation that life seems to have supreme significance. It releases a flood of joyous and strenuous activity.

An English Quaker, D. F. Buxton, tells us:

> The Communist view of human nature seems to me far more inspired by Faith, Hope and Charity than our own. To them the prime cause of evil . . . is the poison of wealth which stultifies men's natural instincts of fellowship. Their confidence in unspoilt human nature forbids the Communists to believe in self-interest as the indispensable motive by which alone the economic machine can be kept going.

A couple of examples from a vast *sottisier*. Perhaps the worst was Hewlett Johnson, the "Red Dean" of Canterbury, who wrote a Webb-style book, *The Socialist Sixth of the World*. I came across him in the Communist Balkans in the late 1940s: the main impression was one of overpowering vanity.

Hollywood too did its best. It is true that film directors now falsify even their own history, but in mid-Stalinism we get the movie "Red Star," about a Soviet collective farm which was so excessively paradisical that it could not be shown in the Soviet Union. The film version of Ambassador Joseph Davies's "Mission to Moscow" was similarly Stalinophile, though we are told that a scene showing Trotsky plotting with Hitler was dropped (Orwell commented that it was perhaps too reminiscent of Stalin's real pact with Hitler in 1939).

I started by advancing a general reason, or context, for these phenomena. I argued that they arose from an excessive regard for equality as against liberty. That is, people thought they saw a system, superior to our own, in which the abhorrent profit motive had been eliminated (in a sense so it had but there are other ways of robbing the population). It was rather as if they would rejoice to find a slum landlord had been replaced by a gangster extortionist.

Much of the heat of battle was borne by those within the liberal intelligentsia who not only were not deceived but also fought for the truth over years of slander and discouragement. We might in fact say that there are two sorts of liberal, as there are two sorts of cholesterol, one good and one bad. The difficulty is, or has been, that good liberalism implies a good deal of mental self-control.

But even this is hardly enough to explain how the mind of the liberal intelligentsia became so much a subject of deception and self-deception. We must inquire further.

That is so even when we consider the attraction of anything "non-capitalist"—even when we consider domestic resentment against "conservatives" on home soil—for, as Macaulay writes of British politicians in the eighteenth century, "it is the nature of parties to retain their original enmities far more firmly than their original principles." But "Pas d'ennemi à gauche"—the idea that the far left, even if wrong in some respects, when it came down to essentials was against the real enemy, the right—cannot sustain the pro-Communist liberal case. For, as I

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have noted, not all on the far left were covered: Trotskyites, the POUM in Spain, Anarchists. If we ask why this did not affect some "liberal" minds, it seems that in the first two cases, at least, the Stalinist version (that these were not "left" at all, but secret agencies of Hitler) had some distractive effect. Then again, the Trotskyites lacked the huge propaganda funding available to Stalinists everywhere: though the pervasiveness of a notion has traditionally not been the key point for critical minds; and where issues of fact were in question, the anti-Stalinist left was not only truer, but also far more plausible.

We can list, in addition to utopianism and parochial partisanship, a number of other characteristics to be found, if not in all, than in many of the Stalinophiles (and Maoophiles, Castrophiles, and Ho-ophiles). In some cases vanity, in others pleasure at adulation, in others yet an adolescent romanticism about "revolution" as such. Nor should mere boredom be omitted, as Simone de Beauvoir once confessed. Which may remind us of the attitudes of a certain type of French intellectual, different, but not all that different, from his American or British counterparts, as given by Herbert Luthy in the early 1960s.

> For ten years the French intellectuals have discussed the big issues of the day so to speak in front of the looking-glass, in search less of facts and knowledge than of an attitude befitting their traditional role—of the "correct pose."

Then the word "Communism" has a vaguely positive appeal unlike the alien "Fascism." One notices that it's always "fascist" that is used by "liberals" to describe regimes or attitudes of which they disapprove, though Fascist Italy was, by totalitarian standards, a very mild variant. A more apt phrase, one would have thought, of a far more dreadful example of what is taken as a "rightwing" terror-regime, is "National Socialism," but one seldom sees this.

More basic may be Orwell's idea that most people are in some sense "nationalists": that is, they have and need an emotional allegiance to their country—or against their country. This "anti-patriotic" strain can certainly be noted in one variety of liberalism. Its most frequent symptom is the use of Dr. Johnson's remark "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel"—commonly used, even now, as a sort of putdown by critics of the patriotic.

How anyone could imagine that Johnson was against patriotism in its modern sense is most peculiar. If anything, he was almost a chauvinist. In controversy his main victims were Whigs, on whom he has many offensive remarks. Winthrop Mackworth Praed wrote of a moderate character:

> And much he loathed the patriot's snort,
> And much he scorned the placeman's snuffle.

The two factions being in fact the extreme Whigs and Tories. The word "patriotism" for Johnson meant adherence to the most ostentatious Whiggism, what would now be called leftism. Macaulay's treatment, in his essay on Horace Walpole, is the most readily available. Himself a Whig, he treats the "patriot" faction with contempt. One should surely treat rather similarly the subliterate misuse of Johnson.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that the true heroes of the long argument were not so much the committed anti-Communist conservatives. They were, of course, right, and fully deserve the verdict in their favor as against the pro-Communist liberals. But much of the heat of battle was borne by those within the liberal intelligentsia who not only were not deceived but also fought for the truth over years of slander and discouragement. We might in fact say that there are two sorts of liberal, as there are two sorts of cholesterol, one good and one bad. The difficulty is, or has been, that good liberalism implies a good deal of mental self-control.

And nowadays? Kenneth Minogue, the Anglo-Australian political scientist, has ob-

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served that "as radicals have lost plausible utopias of one kind or another—from the Soviet Union to Cuba—they have become more ferociously intolerant of the society in which they live." There are plenty of up-to-date insane absurdities, such as John Le Carré writing (in a letter to *The Washington Post*) that "capitalism" was today killing many more than Communism ever had; like Nigel Nicolson in Britain saying that Solzhenitsyn had betrayed his country just as Anthony Blunt had his. And in academe we *still* find noisy cliques working to lower the Soviet death roll; to prove the West as the villains of the Cold War; and to call for "dispassionate" study of Stalin and Mao.

From the 1980s we find, at least in the U.S., a school, or congeries, not perhaps as overtly devoted to unreason as their colleagues in English departments, but still concerned, like the Webbs and others before them:

1. to keep the casualties of Communism as low as is remotely feasible;
2. to treat the terrors as minor matters;
3. to condemn any "judgmental" treatment of Communism in favor of the dispassionate;
4. to deny the word "totalitarian" any validity—though used of the USSR by both Gorbachev and Yeltsin (and, of course, by serious Western scholars like Leszek Kolakowski and Giovanni Sartori);
5. if no longer to present the Stalinist and Maoist regimes as ideal, as least to treat them as normal—they were neither;
6. to promote each others' interests.

Insofar as liberalism is concerned, its hesperophobic component is clearly involved. As in other fields, the less extreme campus liberals, indeed liberals in almost the old sense, are prepared (in a somewhat unilateral tolerance) to allow, and even promote, such colleagues.

And all this applies also to a subspecies who argue that the USA was the main culprit, or at least an equal culprit, in the Cold War. Such notions are, of course, not confined to campuses. We now get an allegedly historical film series sponsored by Ted Turner, which, with some concessions to reality, in effect tilts the balance against the West, Stalin offset by McCarthy, Castro better than Kennedy.[2]

At any rate, Stalinism and Maoism may be dead, but they still pollute the intellectual atmosphere. More generally the "liberal" input into policy through miseducation is bad enough. "Peace Studies," usually a thoroughly distorting approach, are taught to defenceless teenagers. And that is apart from the fact that this is one of the many substitutes for education that take up so much of the wasted time now seen in the schools.

Can one offer any advice to the current generation of liberals? Well, one can advise them not to let passions provoked by the internal politics of their homelands go too far. Rhetoric of party faction is part of democratic life, but do not project it into your assessment of alien regimes and mentalities, and do not accept accounts of these cultures provided by partisan sources without a critical assessment (a point that applies, indeed, to the acceptance of supposed facts in any field in which strong emotions prevail).

As to the academics criticized above, it seems that nothing is to be done. They are committed to their misconceptions. One can only urge their younger colleagues (even if hardly able to speak out frankly in an atmosphere of academic persecution, denial of tenure, and so on) that they should work at least at thinking independently, while biding their time.

Above all, as Granville Hicks, himself temporarily deceived, put it: "it is no defence whatever for an intellectual to say that he was duped, since that is what, as an intellectual, he should never allow to happen to him."

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2 See "Illusions of Equivalance" by James Bowman (November 1998) for a review of CNN's *Cold War*.

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Jackson Pollock & the New York School, II

by Hilton Kramer

Somewhere deep in every American heart lies a rebellion against the old parenthood of Europe.
—D. H. Lawrence, 1923.

Until well into the 1940s, Jackson Pollock's painting remained locked in a struggle to master and overcome the influences of the European modernist painters he took as his models—primarily Picasso, Kandinsky, and Miró. That he was not himself an artist in their class was more or less taken for granted even by his most ardent admirers at the time. It is doubtful that Pollock himself believed he was an artist in their class. Yet what he brought to his encounter with these European masters was a fierce determination to produce an art that would somehow carry him beyond the styles and conventions he was wrestling with. Among much else, this meant that traditional easel painting had to be abandoned in favor of something the European masters of modernism had not yet attempted to place at the center of their art—a mode of mural-scale wall painting of a radically subjective character.

Pollock seems to have understood that as an easel painter he would never be able to trump his European masters. Not only did they bring to the tradition of the easel picture a richer and more complex command of experience than any that was within his own reach, but they had effectively transformed the content of the easel picture to conform to the imperatives of that experience. Mural-scale wall painting of a certain persuasion—painting that would be tethered not to the service of some social cause but to the only subject that governed the artist's will: his own troubled psyche—offered a way to circumvent the tradition to which Pollock could not finally make a significant contribution.

It was in the interest of circumventing that tradition that the influence of the Mexican muralists, the public art of Thomas Hart Benton, and Pollock's own response to Picasso's *Guernica* all played a crucial role in determining his leap into mural-scale wall painting in the late 1940s. It was in the scale and ambition of such painting, not in its ethos or imagery, that Pollock saw the possibility of a radical artistic opportunity. For the social content of 1930s mural painting Pollock felt no affinity whatever. Indifferent to politics and fundamentally antisocial in his personal behavior, Pollock had only one subject that commanded his loyalty: his own appetites, ambitions, and compulsions, which years of Jungian psychoanalysis had elevated in his own mind to the status of a cosmological imperative. (Hence his megalomaniac assertion that "I *am* nature!") It wasn't until he was able to bring those appetites and ambitions into alignment with a pictorial technique allowing them unfettered expression—unfettered, that is, by the traditional tools and constraints of easel painting—that Pollock was able to achieve an art uniquely his own.

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It is for this reason that the "drip" abstractions of the late 1940s and early 1950s are inevitably the central focus in any comprehensive account of Pollock's oeuvre. It is one of the distinctions of the "Jackson Pollock" retrospective which Kirk Varnedoe has organized at the Museum of Modern Art that it assembles a larger number of these abstract paintings than has ever before been seen in a single exhibition.[1] This, in my view, is also one of the principal liabilities of the exhibition, for what has come to be regarded as "classic" Pollock is not, after all, an art of infinite variety. It is maddeningly repetitious in its formal rhythms. It is paltry in its command of color, for classic Pollock is largely based on light-dark contrasts rather than chromatic structure. Classic Pollock also lacks breadth, as even Clement Greenberg acknowledged, in its range of feeling and invention.

Given these limitations, such paintings are best seen in isolation from each other. They actually gain something from being viewed in the company of abstract paintings unlike themselves in method and imagery —which is generally how we do see these Pollocks in museum collections—for the contrasts to be observed in such contexts have the effect of underscoring the element of furious, headlong energy in Pollock. When a large number of Pollock's abstract paintings are seen in close succession, however—as they are in the MOMA retrospective—their much-vaunted energy tends to deflate and flatten into decorative tedium. The more we look, the less we find. What may strike us initially as random and reckless in the labyrinthine traceries of dripped and poured pigment soon reveals itself to be involuntarily governed by an ineluctable and compulsive monotony. Pollock's unconscious, to the extent that it was called upon by his automatist methods to supply him with images, forms, and ideas, turned out to be a very limited resource. But then, so too was the element of conscious control in Pollock. Which may be why classic Pollock turned out to have a lifespan of less than five years.

Even so, the paintings produced in the early stages of this short-lived period are more interesting than those that came at the end. If we take *Cathedral* (1947) as marking its beginning, then it was pretty much over by 1950, the year in which Pollock produced *Lavender Mist*, *Autumn Rhythm*, and a number of similar paintings in which he seems to have been able to effect a more workable equation between uncertainty and control than either before or after. That there remained a large element of uncertainty in Pollock's own view of what he was doing in the drip abstractions even in his best years is evident in his introduction of Miróesque cut-out figures in 1948–49. In the eight-foot-wide *Out of the Web* (1949), for example, the figures actually dominate the web-like traceries of pigment. By the time we get to *Blue Poles* (1952), uncertainty has been supplanted by predictability. *Blue Poles* is the Abstract Expressionist version of Salon painting. Classic Pollock had become its own cliché. And in the few years that remained, Pollock is seen to be attempting something like a return to easel painting.

No one has given us a better account of the artistic implications of the shift from easel painting to wall painting in Pollock than the late William C. Seitz in his early study of *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*.[2]

> Until 1946 [wrote Seitz] Pollock's paint surfaces were passionately molded with brush and knife in what Thomas Hess characterized as a "heavy, dark Expressionist idiom." The irreducible unit of his style, despite rectilinear structure, was the individual stroke, though its

1 "Jackson Pollock" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on November 1, 1998, and remains on view until February 2, 1999.

2 Originally written as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University in 1955, Seitz's *Abstract Expressionist Painting in American* was not published as a book until 1983, when Harvard University Press brought it out with a forward by Robert Motherwell and an introduction by Dore Ashton.

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> identity was apt to be lost in the total textural maelstrom and the optical pulsation effected by variegated color.

Out of this "total textural maelstrom," according to Seitz, came "Pollock's identification of passion with nonobjective brush tracks," and this in turn led him to a pictorial method in which "tools seldom touched the painting surface"—the method Seitz described as "the flow or drip of enamel from brush, stick, or can."

Seitz then addressed the crucial question of "the degree and nature of the control that the artist intentionally or unconsciously exerts over his medium." While reminding us that "The idea of accident is deeply entrenched in modern tradition," Seitz went on to observe that Pollock had

> demonstrated that direction can be given to even so fluid and willful a medium as poured enamel. Control here applies not to the exact track and shape of each brushstroke [sic] to be sure, but to the types of relationship inherent in the process. Individual passages . . . at no point evidence the direct touch of the painter. Rather, it is his entire bodily activity that from a distance influences, but by no means determines, his configuration. Accident, gravity, and the fluid response of the paint combine with human gesture to form a structure that is the result of their interaction.

About the pictorial structure that results from this interaction, Seitz also offered some cogent observations.

> It is easy to see three-dimensional structure in Pollock's pictures; and as one's consciousness moves, in exploring his endless space of cellular division, time is involved as well. Finally, following the perceptual jolt by which one's impression of a visual field shifts, hollow space becomes flat surface. What was open structure is seen as a network of lines that weave above and below each other across the canvas, and the spectator is excluded. The picture, still vital, becomes a wall decoration.

Now the possibility that it might be the fate of mural-scale abstract painting to be experienced as wall decoration—"wallpaper," as Harold Rosenberg derisively characterized it in "The American Action Painters"—was an issue that was deeply troubling to virtually all of the painters of the New York School. That is why there was so much heated discussion lavished on the importance of the "subject" from the earliest days of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940s. It was believed—some of the time, anyway, by some of the artists—that a compelling subject would forestall abstraction's descent into wall decoration. There were New York School painters—Mark Rothko prominently among them—who insisted that the only legitimate subject for abstract painting was some mythic or mystical vision of human tragedy, yet few observers of his art could find any hint or suggestion of such a subject in the paintings he actually created. Willem de Kooning, on the other hand, downgraded the very notion that "content" might play an important role in painting—"It's very tiny—very tiny, content," he said—but his own argument was undermined by the series of *Women* paintings that placed him in a direct line of descent from Picasso, for whom a subject had always been crucial. There was never any consensus on the subject of a "subject" in the New York School, nor could there be—for it was in the very nature of Abstract Expressionist painting for each of its practitioners to conduct a radically subjective dialogue with the art of the European modernists they aspired to supplant.

In this respect, certainly, Robert Motherwell was far more candid than most of his colleagues in the New York School when he observed that

> Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is his real subject, of which anything he paints is both a homage and a *critique*, and everything he says a gloss.

Yet the idea that "the whole culture of

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modern painting" might in fact be the unacknowledged subject of Abstract Expressionist painting—which I firmly believe to be the case—was deeply distasteful to many painters in the movement, who regarded it as an affront to their high-risk, existential ambitions as members of an embattled avant-garde. It was an idea that for many people in the art world conjured up discredited notions of art-for-art's-sake and "significant form"—theories that were believed to give priority to art over life, and thus inevitably put in question the ambition of the New York School painting to produce an art so radical that it would at some level challenge the life of the time.

It was for this reason that Harold Rosenberg's theory of "action painting" scored such an immense success when it was first promulgated in 1952. In a single bold stroke, Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters" appeared to remove the entire Abstract Expressionist movement from both the history of modern painting and the pettifogging distinctions of aesthetic discourse by situating it instead in some exalted realm of existential "action," where, as the author claimed, "what matters always is the revelation contained in the act," and such mundane matters as "Form, color, composition, drawing . . . can be dispensed with." This was the key passage in what amounted to a declaration of independence from what D. H. Lawrence had called "the old parenthood of Europe":

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

It was further claimed by Rosenberg that "The new American painting is not 'pure' art, since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the aesthetic." On the contrary, Rosenberg wrote, "The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life." From this perspective, then,

> The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, form—as if the painter were still concerned with producing a certain kind of object (the work of art), instead of living on the canvas—is bound to seem a stranger.

If "every distinction between art and life" had been eliminated in this painting, what it called for wasn't art criticism or aesthetic judgment but some existentialist version of psychoanalysis.

> Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked.

The notion that "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" was the sheerest nonsense, of course. But it proved to be very seductive nonsense. For its effect was to provide the Abstract Expressionist movement with an exciting new dramaturgy in which the artist now emerged as an existential hero and his painting was to be seen not as an aesthetic endeavor but as the cynosure of a heroic private action that was not to be judged by aesthetic standards. It was, alas, a very "European" theory, which derived from ideas to be found in Breton's surrealism, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Sartre's existentialism, yet it proved to be so appealing that it was somehow exempted from any negative association with "the old parenthood of Europe."

There was, however, a dirty little secret involved in the promulgation of Rosenberg's theory. For it was well known at the time that Jackson Pollock was the artist upon whose recent work—the mural-scale "drip" abstractions of the late 1940s and early 1950s—Rosenberg had based his theory of "action painting." And it was also well

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known in New York art circles that Rosenberg actually despised Pollock's paintings and had a very low opinion of the man himself. Yet because Pollock was the only painter then at work whose pictorial practice—especially as it was recorded in the photographs by Hans Namuth—seemed to lend itself to Rosenberg's existential "action" scenario, he shamelessly exploited Pollock's notoriety without according him appropriate recognition or even mentioning his name. There was thus at the very core of this famous essay on "The American Action Painters" an act—one might even call it an existential act—of unconscionable bad faith. Yet because Rosenberg was so enamored of his own theory and saw that its publication would bring him a celebrity he had never before enjoyed—which, of course, it promptly did—he turned his private mockery of Pollock's painting into a bogus manifesto for the entire Abstract Expressionist movement.

The unhappy history of this episode in critical legerdemain is now worth recalling not only because it became so inextricably involved in public perceptions of the art of the New York School for so many years but also because something akin to Harold Rosenberg's bad faith in promoting his "action" theory seems to have governed the very conception of the "Jackson Pollock" retrospective at MOMA. Unlike Rosenberg, Mr. Varnedoe cannot be accused of despising Pollock's painting, yet implicit in the atrocious way he has presented the artist's drip abstractions to the public—and without the drip paintings there would be no Pollock retrospective—is an assumption that these are not works of art that can be expected to sustain our attention without recourse to the mythology surrounding their creation.

Hence the unforgivable decision to install a life-size replica of the interior of the Long Island barn that served as Pollock's studio in the exhibition itself. That studio interior is, of course, the *mise en scène* of the media-generated legend of "Jack the Dripper" and all the other nonsense written about Pollock's antics as an artist. Owing to the photographs of Hans Namuth that documented Pollock's "performance" in that studio, it has become a space almost as famous as the paintings that were created in it. At MOMA, moreover, the replica of this studio space is adorned with a copious selections of the Namuth photographs of Pollock at work, and on a video monitor at the entrance there is a film version of the same subject. This replica of the Pollock studio turns out to provide the climactic moment in what is a large and at times a very wearying exhibition, and its function in the retrospective is clearly to give the public something other than Pollock's paintings to look at. To an understanding of Pollock's painting this replica of his studio space contributes nothing. Its purpose is purely dramaturgical. By evoking the legend of the painter performing in the studio, it succeeds in shifting attention from the paintings to the artist himself as he has passed into the mythology of modern cultural life. It certainly succeeds as show biz, but is finally very damaging to the public's understanding of the art.

What the conception of the Pollock retrospective owes to Rosenberg's "action" theory, and what both owe to the folklore generated by Namuth's studio photographs and films, is made explicit by Pepe Karmel, Mr. Varnedoe's collaborater on this exhibition, in his essay for the catalogue accompanying the retrospective. This essay on "Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth," which runs to some forty-five large pages plus 102 footnotes—roughly two-thirds as long as Mr. Varnedoe's own essay on the life and work of the artist—is something of a museological phenomenon in itself. I, at least, cannot recall another museum text of this length in which the most mind-numbing pedantry is so seamlessly combined with such shameless legend-mongering to produce such a negligible critical result. For what momentous discovery does Mr. Karmel come up with after his protracted study of Namuth's ne-

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gatives and the outtakes from the Pollock film project? "Pollock's achievement, in his pictures of 1947–50," writes Mr. Karmel in conclusion, "was to transform graphic flatness into optical flatness—to show that by piling layer upon layer, sign upon sign, you could generate a pictorial sensation equivalent to that of the primordial vision field." He acknowledges that "The impact of this discovery is evident in Pollock's painting," and then adds: "But only through the films and photographs of Hans Namuth can we understand the technique that made it possible."

Yet in this pedantic endeavor Mr. Karmel is guilty of engaging in the very same critical strategy he takes Harold Rosenberg's "action" theory to task for. "Rosenberg's rhetoric encouraged artists and critics to focus on Pollock's actions rather than on the images resulting from them," Karmel correctly observes, and then at much greater length than Rosenberg attempted does exactly the same thing. But since the whole conception of this retrospective is to exploit the Pollock myth rather than to give the public a disinterested account of the artist's accomplishment—which really doesn't require an exhibition on this scale—it was essential for MOMA, too, to concentrate on "Pollock's actions" rather than his art. So the paint-splattered floor of the artist's studio is given a full-color reproduction in the catalogue, and the studio itself has been replicated as a shrine where not the paintings of Jackson Pollock but the photographs of Hans Namuth documenting their production may be pondered as the sacred relics of the artist's legend. All of which has less to do with the life of art than with the current business practices of the art-museum industry.

The first part of "Jackson Pollock and the New York School" appeared in the January issue of *The New Criterion*.

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The magic of contradictions: Willa Cather's lost lady

by Morris Dickstein

First published in 1923, when Willa Cather was almost fifty years old, *A Lost Lady* occupies a special place in her rich and varied body of work. Though it never gained the wide popular appeal of *My Ántonia* or *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which became staples of the school curriculum, it has long been a novel that critics admire extravagantly and ordinary readers recall with passionate enthusiasm. The early reviews were laudatory but a little condescending, for Cather's "portrait of a lady" is barely longer than a novella and centers on a single character. To Edmund Wilson it was "a charming sketch performed with exceptional skill." Joseph Wood Krutch found it "short and slight," not "a great novel" but "that very rare thing in contemporary literature, a nearly perfect one." But the tide was turning by 1937 when Lionel Trilling, not Cather's greatest admirer, described it as "the central work of her career. Far from being the delicate minor book it is often called, it is probably her most muscular story." Later critics, including Alfred Kazin in *On Native Grounds* (1942), followed Trilling in seeing *A Lost Lady* and its even darker successor, *The Professor's House* (1925), as Cather's pivotal works, affecting, powerfully imagined, and strikingly modern even in their recoil from modern life.

The early readers who described the book as a character sketch saw only the brilliance of Cather's portrayal of Marian Forrester, the high-spirited wife of one of the great pioneers and railroad builders. They were less responsive to the historical implications of Cather's fable and missed the enigmatic and ambiguous elements in Mrs. Forrester's portrait. On the surface, Marian Forrester belongs to Cather's long line of restless, magnetic, intelligent women, like Alexandra Bergson, who grows wealthy farming the virgin land in *O Pioneers!* (1913), Thea Kronborg, the Swedish girl who becomes a famous opera singer in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and Ántonia Shimerda, the heroine of *My Ántonia* (1918), who survives tragedy and abandonment to become the mother of many children, "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."

Those earlier women were immigrants, and Cather herself grew up among the farms and small towns that shaped their lives. Many of their experiences were also her experiences, and she loved the irrepressible hunger for life she saw in them, which mirrored her own fervent ambition to live boldly. At a time when immigrants in literature were usually treated as comical figures with silly accents or as piteous social victims, when women characters were expected to find happiness only in love or marriage, Cather gave us forceful heroines who tilled the soil, balanced the books, negotiated an alien culture, navigated new worlds in literature and the arts, showed adventurous independent minds, and, above all, had a tremendous spark of emotional and physical vitality that Cather admired as the

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very sap of life. At the end of *My Ántonia*, we learn that the heroine's "inner glow" has not faded: "Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life."

A Lost Lady is a brilliant epilogue to Cather's famous pioneer novels, but it has a different tone, not heroic and optimistic like the Whitmanesque *O Pioneers!* but bittersweet and retrospective like Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*. *O Pioneers!* is a fertility myth in which the golden land yields lovingly to the plough, the women are almost magically in tune with the rhythms of the soil and the seasons, and death is simply the moment of being gathered back into the larger whole, the vibrant heart of nature. This sense of the inevitable is brought home to us by the stately, almost biblical nobility of the book's style. Even in *My Ántonia*, which builds up a harsher picture of the struggles of an immigrant farm family—beginning with unspeakable poverty, miserable living conditions, depression, even suicide—a stirring sense of progress emerges, thanks to hard work and the fecundity of the land. "The windy springs and the blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility," says Jim Burden, the narrator, who has been away in the East. "The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea."

Willa Cather's recollections of pioneer life had not always had this amber glow of fruition. The best stories in her first work of fiction, *The Troll Garden*, were written under the influence of Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), with its tales of back-breaking labor and dreary poverty on Western farms. The early Cather, like Garland, identified the West with small-mindedness, boredom, and conformity, the East with escape, personal development, and a rich artistic culture. In one of Cather's fiercest stories, "The Sculptor's Funeral," the nasty backbiting that surrounds the funeral of a native son, who had made his reputation as an artist in the East, exposes one Western town as a "dung heap," a "borderland between ruffianism and civilization." Another example occurs in "A Wagner Matinée." A farm wife, turned old, dull, and shapeless by her labors, long deprived of any real stimulation, visits Boston where she discovers, with a terrible pang of recognition, the musical life she left behind long ago. After attending a concert with her nephew, she bursts into tears and hates to leave the empty hall:

> For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall unpainted house, with weather-curled boards, naked as a tower; the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys, picking up refuse about the kitchen door.

These carefully etched details, recorded by the young man who witnesses her misery, anticipate the way Cather would use her precise memories of growing up in Nebraska to write her prairie novels. Willa Cather was born in the Shenandoah country of Virginia in 1873, but when she was nine her parents pulled up stakes and joined the rest of the family on a farm in Nebraska. Initially Cather felt she had fallen off the edge of the world. "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields," her narrator writes near the beginning of *My Ántonia*. "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction." Her own early sense of dislocation undoubtedly heightened the empathy she felt for immigrants and exiles.

After a year she moved with her family to Red Cloud, a town barely ten years old, where she encountered a world quite different from the farm. As a mischievous tomboy, a hungry and eager reader, and also someone who lived at the tip of her senses,

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Cather felt stifled by the atmosphere of respectability that weighed more heavily on girls than on boys, on "Americans" more than on immigrants. Yet it was in Red Cloud and on the nearby farms—among brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, among sympathetic neighbors who fed her books and stories, and, especially, among the bright, enterprising "hired girls" who were helping to support their immigrant families—that Cather absorbed the vivid impressions and memories that would carry her through most of her writing life. "I was all over the country then, on foot, on horseback and in our farm wagon," she later recalled. "My nose went poking into nearly everything. It happened that my mind was constructed for the particular purpose of absorbing impressions and retaining them."

Cather loved the ordinary rhythms of rural life but grew up with a hatred of the routine, the commonplace, "the homilies by which the world is run" (as she described it in "Paul's Case," her best known story, about someone who is different and soon ground under). Among those in Red Cloud who lent a touch of romance and distinction to her life was Silas Garber, a former Union officer who had founded the town in 1870 and was elected Governor of Nebraska four years later. He had a much younger wife whose elegance and vivacity made a strong impression on the young Cather. Living amid a beautiful grove of cottonwood trees at the edge of town, the Garbers were the nobility of Red Cloud, their lives a window onto the pioneer days when the town was settled. Cather based her account of the Forresters in *A Lost Lady* on her warm memories of the Garbers, which came flooding back when she read of Mrs. Garber's death in 1921.

What Cather felt she needed was a point of view to register the effect of the Forresters, especially the lovely Mrs. Forrester. "I had to have something for Marian Forrester's charm to work on," she remarked. "You can't talk about beauty for pages and pages." In "A Wagner Matinée" Cather had evoked the miserable life and appearance of an overworked farm woman through the eyes of her young nephew, now living far from her world, who serves as embarrassed spectator to his aunt's unhappiness. In *O Pioneers!*, the work in which she found her true voice, Cather had dispensed with such a onlooker; his "culture" and detachment had clouded her lens, and his style—which was hers at the time—was too Jamesian, too literary, and therefore condescending. Cather's early stories had been inflected by her own need to get away, by the long road she had traveled from Red Cloud. In *O Pioneers!*, she was reunited with her past. Following the advice of her mentor, the New England writer Sarah Orne Jewett, to write from the heart, she tapped directly into her recollections in a style of almost epic simplicity. But Cather could not honestly sustain such an impersonal viewpoint; these were *her* memories. Moreover they were a young person's memories, sometimes little more than a child's impressions; they involved people she could not fully understand, people who were at some level unknowable to her.

Cather solved this problem in *My Ántonia* by handing the story off to a surrogate, Jim Burden, whose early life resembled her own. This is *his* Ántonia: we see her by fits and starts, episodically, through his eyes. Ántonia is absent from the novel for long periods, and when Jim goes away for twenty years, as Cather too had gone away, Jim catches up with her life through other people's reports before he sees her again. Cather's solution isn't wholly successful: Jim Burden wavers between being a full-fledged character and a mask for the author, and since he is said to be male we never understand why his relationship to Ántonia and other women never fully develops. (It falters, lesbian critics suggest, because of Cather's own masked and obstructed sexuality, but to Cather herself it simply reflected what she really was, an observer.) Yet the narrator furnishes Cather with something very valuable, a precisely situated viewpoint on the world of her

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youth. Forsaking the novelistic contrivances of a shapely, unified plot and omniscient knowledge, Cather organizes her book around the act of remembering, with its gaps of time and recollection, its moments of transcendence, its privileged glimpses of a long-buried world: simple images fraught with strong feeling.

The casual, lifelike pattern of memory in *My Ántonia* foreshadows something decisive in *A Lost Lady*: a sense of character as mystery, a Wordsworthian way of seeing by glimpses that respects the "burden" of the mystery. Cather deliberately avoided telling us too much about a character; she believed in withholding character, as she once wrote in a letter to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher. The story of Mrs. Forrester's life preceding her marriage comes so late in the novel, and is so condensed and improbable, that it's almost a satire on our need to know, a deliberate piece of "fiction." The original Mrs. Garber was not one of Cather's contemporaries, like Ántonia, but a kind of Lady Bountiful to the young people of the town. We see Marian Forrester from young Niel Herbert's angle of vision: he is at first adoring, then bitterly disenchanted, and at last grudgingly reconciled to her complex nature. Her impact on him is the heart of the novel, the key to its effect on the reader. Niel is not actually the narrator, since Cather needed to put things in the story that he could not have witnessed (and could not abide), but he enables Cather to evoke all that these people meant to her as a girl in Red Cloud, the town here called Sweet Water.

For many years critics saw Niel simply as a window on the Forresters' world. Cather's first biographers, E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, wrote that Niel was "simply Jim Burden from *My Ántonia* renamed"; a later critic, Philip Gerber, carelessly described him as "the narrator of the novel," adding that "Niel exists chiefly to represent the author and her attitude." Cather herself once said in an interview that "he isn't a character at all; he is just a peephole into that world. . . . He is only a point of view." But some recent critics have argued that because of his horror at Mrs. Forrester's adultery and his disgust at her refusal to "immolate herself" after her husband's death ("she preferred life on any terms"), Niel's point of view cannot be fully trusted. The question can be posed simply: Is Mrs. Forrester truly "a lost lady" after her husband's death, "like a ship without ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind," as Niel thinks; or is she simply lost *to him*, because, like an unhappy adolescent robbed of his innocence, he cannot bear the sexual form of the vitality that first enthralled him. "Lilies that fester smell far worse then weeds," he mutters to himself, echoing the disillusionment of Shakespeare's Sonnet 94, with its lament that "sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds."

This issue can never be resolved, for what makes *A Lost Lady* such a rich and resonant work, as enchanting as its heroine, as ambiguous as its title, is that Cather has it both ways. She uses Niel as a delicate sensor to register the impact of Captain Forrester as a survivor of the frontier generation and of his wife as a beacon of graciousness, elegance, and beauty for Sweet Water. "*A Lost Lady* was a woman I loved very much in my childhood," Cather said in the same interview. "I wasn't interested in her character when I was little, but in her lovely hair and her laugh which made me happy clear down to my toes." *A Lost Lady* conveys the magic of an impressionable child's point of view but also its inevitable limitations. The Captain himself pointedly rebukes Niel's implicit judgment of his wife; he makes it clear that he's aware of her affair and understands the complexity of her character, including her sexual needs, as Niel cannot; he shows Niel how much he values her.

Niel grows up in the course of the book, fired up at first by what the Forresters represent ("a different world from any he had ever known"), but then also educated by the troubles they undergo, the painful reverses that complicate their lives in a way he can only fathom as an adult (and barely

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even then). Cather drew inspiration from Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, in which a young man is drawn by the beauty and charm of an older woman, only to find how disappointing, how commonplace, life can be, and to be left in the end with little more than a few early memories. But Cather added a generous dose of *Hamlet*, where another young man recoils from a woman's middle-aged sexuality, her insistence on surviving her husband and living life "on any terms." The novel's epigraph is from the disconnected ramblings of Ophelia, truly a lost lady. But the title phrase appears in the novel only as "his long-lost lady," with her "long-lost lady laugh," suggesting that despite the reverses in her life, she is lost only to Niel, who cannot keep from condemning her. But in the end, we hear, "he came to be very glad that he had known her, and that she had had a hand in breaking him in to life." After the idealizations that lit up his childhood, after his own failure to find the happiness her bright laughter had promised, he learns something about the mixed, ambiguous nature of the adult world.

If Niel's education were the whole story, the novel would be a sketchy example of the bildungsroman, the novel of personal culture or development. If Marian's adultery were the whole story, *A Lost Lady* would be a minor offshoot of works like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, or Kate Chopin's *Awakening*, which Willa Cather reviewed caustically when it appeared in 1899. Like *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady* is a memory novel: by focusing on what the Forresters once meant to Niel, it conveys Cather's darkening sense of how the West has changed since she grew up. The settlers of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* were homesteaders taming the land and making it fruitful by sweat and labor. But Daniel Forrester represents another kind of pioneer, the adventurer and entrepreneur; he and his powerful friends belong to the railroad aristocracy of "the road-making West." They "dreamed the railroads across the mountains," says the Captain, "just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water." They were the "men who had put plains and mountains under the iron harness."

There is a curiously abstract quality to Cather's reminiscence of the pioneer days in *A Lost Lady*. It feels disembodied, like a fairy tale of long ago. Where *My Ántonia*, written only five years earlier, gives us a vivid sense of the hardships of frontier life, in this novel the pioneers are remote figures, reduced to brilliant metaphor: they "*dreamed* the railroads across the mountains," they "put the plains and mountains *under the iron harness*." Those who built the railroads were not simply bold and hardy dreamers, as they appear here, but Gilded Age buccaneers, venturesome capitalists supported by cheap labor and vast federal subsidies. Here the Forresters and their friends take on the fabric of legend. "It had already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back. The taste and smell and song of it, the visions those men had seen in the air and followed,—these he had caught in a kind of afterglow in their own faces,—and this would always be his." These people and their stories added color, dash, and dreamy aspiration to Cather's childhood.

A Lost Lady weaves an elegiac myth about "the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer," for Cather saw such people not simply as enterpreneurs and fortune-builders, not even as discoverers and nation-builders but as a local aristocracy of manners and moral responsibility. Now they are being replaced by new men whose conscience is not so fine, who cheat Indians out of their land and small bank depositors out of their savings. When a bank in which he has a major interest fails, Forrester impoverishes himself (and later his widow) by making good on every dime. "That was what a man of honour was bound to do," explains Niel's uncle, another man of the old school. Captain Forrester's "clumsy dignity covered a deep nature, and a conscience that had never been juggled with."

Despite the seeming casualness of the narrative, which at first appears to be no

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more than random memories punctuated by gaps and elisions, *A Lost Lady* is the most tightly organized novel Cather wrote, with hardly a spare word. The themes I've touched on here, the education of a young man and the dignity of the old order, are foreshadowed from the opening pages. The first two chapters form a prologue, set seven years before the main action begins, that shows us the Forresters' world at its zenith, when both their marriage and the town are still thriving. The story begins like a fairy tale, on "a summer morning long ago, when Mrs. Forrester was still a young woman, and Sweet Water was a town of which great things were expected." The Forresters' house "would probably have been ugly enough" but is made special by its lovely setting and the way of life of those who inhabit it. The prologue evokes the heyday of the pioneers, when Sweet Water was an important division point on the Burlington Railroad, and the house, set on a beautiful Indian site, was the place the railroad barons stopped to pay their respects and be graciously received. But now it has become a vestige of that earlier time. Mrs. Forrester extends her hospitality even to the boys of the town, including Niel (age 12), who fish and hike and play on the land.

The snake in this garden is an older boy named Ivy Peters—nicknamed Poison Ivy—who specializes in poisoning dogs and torturing birds. When Niel climbs a tree to put a blinded bird out of its misery, he breaks his arm and gets a luxurious taste of Mrs. Forrester's loving care. "He was in pain, but he felt weak and contented. . . . The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again." Ivy Peters, Niel's opposite number, is already the young upstart, the new man who feels that "I'm just as good as she is." For now he is expelled from the house by her "imperious courtesy." But eventually he will take revenge by draining the Forresters' lovely marsh, which stands not only for the children's Eden but also for the kind of impractical, unproductive beauty cultivated by the old order. As a young lawyer who amasses wealth by cutting corners, Peters will condescend to the Captain and, after the old man's death, have an affair with his wife and eventually take over her property.

All this is anticipated in the opening chapters. The Forresters, with their Sherwood Forest style of generosity, will give way to the Ivy Peters of the world, "this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times," who exploit the fruits of the world the pioneers made. Ivy Peters is the great flaw in Cather's parable. Not only pragmatic but dishonest, disrespectful, gratuitously sadistic, he helps us notice how Cather idealizes the old order and demonizes the forces that shaped the modern world. Stepping outside the frame of her story, she cannot resist blazing out at all he represents when he drains the Forresters' marsh and puts their land to prosaic use:

> The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest.

In her next novel, *The Professor's House*, Cather would stay clear of the cardboard villainy of Ivy Peters and create a much more nuanced fable of decline, with the professor's student, Tom Outland, as the pure adventurer, who luckily dies in the war before he can fall into compromise, and the professor's son-in-law, the charming and ingratiating Louie Marsellus, as the enterprising Jew who knows how to market Outland's discoveries. Cather will build the

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story not around a single house, as in *A Lost Lady*, but around a series of houses, from the ancient cliff-dwellings of New Mexican Indians to soulless homes with all modern conveniences.

Yet even in *A Lost Lady* Cather qualified her moral when she describes the pioneers as "dreamers" and Ivy Peters as the man who "would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness," or when she tells us that the Captain, having no children of his own, is a man who "could afford to humour his own fancies." Dreams, mirages, fancies, and the morning dew are things that are inevitably dispelled, that evaporate of their own nature. Cather turns the rugged pioneers into myth, the antithesis of all she finds detestable in the new, more utilitarian West. But her tone signals that she's idealizing them, reifying a lost world as she remembers it from childhood. In Niel's painful disillusionment with Mrs. Forrester, Cather takes the full measure of this disabling idealization.

"Life began for me," Willa Cather once said, "when I ceased to admire and began to remember." This is a shift Niel cannot fully make, for he clings to his childhood image of the Forresters and his disgust at how their lives and the world have changed. Much of this undoubtedly reflects Cather's own burnished memories: the courtliness and dignity of the Captain, his wife's "soft, musical laugh which rose and descended like a suave scale." Yet Cather's fable takes on a life of its own that subtly separates us from Niel's viewpoint. Though Cather maintained that Niel was no character, she nevertheless gave him a history that begins and ends in unhappiness. For Niel as a child, "home was not a pleasant place to go to; a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived." His mother had died when he was five, and his agreeable father was not a success. A poor relation keeps house for them in a slovenly way that Niel despises. Except for his uncle, the Judge, one of the town's old grandees, "Niel felt there was an air of failure and defeat about his family." For a boy like this, who aspires to something finer, the Forresters are royalty, their way of life magical.

When the town's economy falters and his father leaves for Denver, Niel lives "with monastic cleanliness and severity" behind his uncle's law offices, and this brings him into greater contact with the Forresters just as their world is beginning to unravel. They give him an intimation of another, more elegant life. He has seen fashionable women but "had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester. Compared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless,—they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle." Niel is now nineteen, yet his attraction to Mrs. Forrester is not primarily sexual; it comes from her association with a bygone age. Cather remarks how strange this is: "Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else." Yet this rather dry admiration is belied by the excitement Niel actually feels in her presence. "Where Mrs. Forrester was, dulness was impossible, Niel believed." She is vivid and witty and has an artist's keen powers of attention and self-projection. "One could talk with her about the most trivial things, and go away with a high sense of elation."

Niel's extreme reaction to his discovery of her affair with Frank Ellinger is more like a lover's or a son's jealousy than a young admirer's disapproval. Long before Niel knows anything of this liaison, he feels repelled by Ellinger's very presence, by his sexual energy: "His whole figure seemed very much alive under his clothes, with a restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it. . . . [Niel] didn't know whether he liked him or not. He knew nothing bad about him, but

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he felt something evil." Frank's energy is contrasted with the Captain's mountainous and dignified immobility, which Niel cherishes. Cather had begun the book with Niel as narrator, but soon rewrote it in the third person, heightening the ambiguity by detaching the reader from Niel's outlook. We first learn of the affair from the adoring young Adolph Blum ("With Adolph Blum her secrets were safe. His mind was feudal; the rich and fortunate were also the privileged"). Later Niel finds it out for himself in what only can be seen as a lover's fancy gone awry, or the primal scene of a child witnessing his mother's violation.

This is how it happens. With Frank in town and her husband gone, Niel is determined to call on her early one morning, when the marsh is "globed with dew" and there is "an almost religious purity about the fresh morning air," when the day is "still unsullied, like a gift handed down from the heroic ages."

> He would make a bouquet for a lovely lady; a bouquet gathered off the cheeks of morning . . . these roses, only half awake, in the defencelessness of utter beauty. . . .—and they would perhaps give her a sudden distaste for coarse worldlings like Frank Ellinger.

Instead, outside her bedroom window, he overhears them laughing together. In disgust, he throws the roses into "a mudhole the cattle had trampled under the bank of the creek," a spot that suggests his view of their lovemaking, perhaps of sex in general. To Niel his lovely lady, exalted and unreachable like the heroine of romance, has suddenly become a lost lady. His reaction is melodramatic, despairing. He feels that his sense of reality has been altered forever, that purity and freshness and trust have been banished from the world. "In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. Before the dew dried, the morning had been wrecked for him; and all subsequent mornings, he told himself bitterly."

It's conceivable that Cather herself would have shared Niel's repugnance. As Blanche Gelfant showed in an essay on *My Ántonia* in 1971, Cather's work repeatedly associates sex and marriage with dissolution and death, as when the thwarted young lovers in *O Pioneers!* are murdered by the woman's deranged husband just moments after they fall into each others' arms. Cather's male narrators may have been a mask for her own attraction to the vibrant women she writes about. Or she may simply have felt that true friendship, intellectual companionship, and a consanguinity of souls made for a more enduring connection than sex, like the lifelong bond between the two priests in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Throughout her life she had intense friendships with other women, and when her closest companion, Isabelle McClung, decided suddenly to marry in 1916, Cather was visibly shattered. (As if to override her ambivalence, Cather dedicated both *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* to McClung's husband, a Canadian-Jewish violinist named Jan Hambourg.) Whatever her own feelings about sex, the story takes on a logic of its own, and Cather makes it impossible for the reader of *A Lost Lady* either to identify fully with Niel's reaction or to disengage from it. This paradoxical quality makes the novel itself as fascinating and elusive as its main character, of whom we are told: "She mocked outrageously at the proprieties she observed, and inherited the magic of contradictions."

As Cather portrays it, there's a childish petulance and disenchantment about Niel's response to Mrs. Forrester's fall, which reveals how much he has put her on a pedestal. But she refuses to play the courtly lady, and tries to serve her own needs while remaining impeccably devoted to her failing husband. Not only does the Captain show Niel how well he understands her, but Cather also allows her to defend herself passionately against Niel's disapproval. Niel would have her live on grace and style alone, but even he acknowledges that she

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must have money and people and sexual attention to carry on. ("He dreaded poverty for her.") As the Captain's declining health and income deprive her of the social stimulus she desperately needs, her hunger for life becomes even stronger: "Perhaps people think I've settled down to grow old gracefully, but I've not. I feel such a power to live in me, Niel. . . . I wanted to see whether I had anything left worth saving. And I have, I tell you!"

Niel believes she's worth saving in a different sense: he wants to save her from herself. He cuts the telephone cord with a pair of shears as she is berating her lover for abandoning her—an aggressive stroke we would expect more from Ivy Peters than from Niel. "For once he had been quick enough; he had saved her," he imagines. As when he tried to "save" the blinded bird, it proves to be a futile gesture; the town gossips hear anyway, and this was not how she wanted to be saved. Finally, when the Captain's health deteriorates further, when she loses her grip and commonplace people invade their house, delighted to see how ordinary it is, Niel gives up a year of school in the East to become the family nursemaid, the devoted son. This gives him deep satisfaction—he finds "a kind of solemn happiness in his vigils"—for he has the illusion that he can stop time. He clings to the idealized family he never had, trying to hold on to a vanishing world. Niel's contentment is as revealing as his distress over her affair. "He had the satisfaction of those who keep faith. He liked being alone with the old things that had seemed so beautiful to him in his childhood. . . . No other house could take the place of this one in his life."

There is a great deal of Cather herself in these words. Her attachment to old houses, her anguish at leaving them behind, was legendary, and in *The Professor's House* she even made this the linchpin of a novel, the symbol of her character's depression and resistance to change. She felt that her rediscovery of "the old things"—and people—of her childhood had marked her real beginnings as a writer. She was proud that, like Virgil, she had brought the muse to her native region. Her growing attraction to the Southwest (in *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*) is rooted in the appeal of the "old things" of culture itself, a timeless realm that antedates the changes she had celebrated in her early pioneer novels. Even *My Ántonia* had reached for certain emblematic moments of vision that would become indelible memories: the image of a plough in the sunset, or of the sun and moon together creating a "singular light." At the second of these scenes, Jim Burden dissolves: "I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there." He gazes hard at Ántonia's face as if to memorize it. She herself finally becomes a series of visionary moments for him: "she had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. . . . She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true." This is the monumental Ántonia, fixed in time, not the irreverent, irrepressible Ántonia of the novel's early pages.

In *A Lost Lady*, Cather stripped away the lyricism of *My Ántonia*; we see the lady from Niel's viewpoint yet see around and beyond it. Though adept at playing every part demanded of her, she refuses to be hemmed in by his nostalgic myth. Niel loves the house for what it meant to him, but she feels suffocated by it. He is aghast that she is "finding new friends among the young men," strenuously animating them with her vitality, and he even discourages one of the Captain's old friends from helping her. Niel imagines that "the right man could save her, even now. She was still her indomitable self, going through her old part." But "her old part" is not the one she now wishes to play.

Cather not only allows her to make a case for herself, to assert her right to live on as she pleases, but also refuses to punish her by

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killing her off—the inevitable consequence of adultery in the nineteenth-century novel. Instead she remarries, and Niel is glad to learn "that she was well cared for, to the very end." There may be a trace of bitterness in the way he says this, and something tawdry in what we hear of her life in Buenos Aires, which tartly reflects on her earlier concern about money and her need to carry on no matter what. She is made to seem like a kept woman, desperately holding time at bay with her dyed hair and too much make-up. But she does not immolate herself, as Niel wishes. She is not consumed by guilt and regret.

If Cather, with her own love of the past, shares some of Niel's censure of Mrs. Forrester, she also underlines the element of pathology in his reaction, his outrage at the compromises she makes, his need to imprison her in the role that once delighted him. There's a Swiftian horror to his recoil from her affair and a snobbish aura about his disapproval of her widowed life, her determination to live "on any terms." In the spirit of Swift and Orwell, Niel wonders whether the "brilliancy" of beautiful women is "always fed by something coarse and concealed." Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* had realized the intimate link between the carefree laughter of farm girls and the poetry of Virgil ("if there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry"). But Niel's mind is troubled by the sexual source of a woman's high spirits, style, and vitality. He feels haunted by some dark knowledge and uncertainty:

> Would that chilling doubt always lie in wait for him, down there in the mud, where he had thrown his roses one morning? He burned to ask her one question, to get the truth out of her and set his mind at rest: What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger? Where did she put it away? And having put it away, how could she recover herself, and give one—give even him—the sense of tempered steel, a blade that could fence with anyone and never break?

This is the unsettling riddle of culture itself, the connection between high and low, as Freud would describe it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as Hamlet, Othello, and Lear had obsessed about it in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Like its immediate successors, *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *A Lost Lady* is unquestionably a novel of decline, reflecting both an obscure emotional crisis in Cather and a deep new streak of cultural pessimism. Willa Cather was withdrawing from the modern world, but announcing it in a strikingly modern way. The triumphs of Alexandra, Thea, and Ántonia give way to the bitter disappointments of Marian Forrester, Professor St. Peter, and finally Myra Henshawe, who once ventured all for love but goes to her grave wondering, "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" A rueful aura of defeat and disintegration hangs over all three novels, despite the warm elegiac tone of *A Lost Lady*.

In her prefatory note to a collection of essays, *Not Under Forty*, Cather famously remarked that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts," leaving her and her subjects on the far side of a vast cultural divide. That was the year Cather was writing *A Lost Lady*, the year *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* broke upon the world, the year her ambitious war novel, *One of Ours*, was trashed by serious critics. She was still in pain from the defection of Isabelle McClung. She had always felt a great piety toward the past, but in works like *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, written soon afterward, it began to dominate her work in a new way. There, with an emphasis on serenity, resignation, and renunciation, she created a perfect past from which all passion and conflict had been exorcised.

Cather was sufficiently distressed by the effects of her remark about how "the world broke in two" to erase it from a subsequent edition. Whatever the sources of her malaise, it proved surprisingly beneficial for her work. Her personal crisis made her writing hard as a diamond. In an essay

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called "The Novel Démeublé," also written in 1922, Cather made her case for the kind of pared-down, allusive writing exemplified by *A Lost Lady*. It called on novelists to replace journalistic documentation and Balzacian realism with oblique emotional suggestion. "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created." In a famous phrase, she said that great fiction, like poetry, is marked by this "inexplicable presence of the thing not named." Hemingway, who had dismissed *One of Ours*, would later make this a basis for his aesthetic.

A Lost Lady is the overture to Cather's middle years, when exceptionally spare writing and tragic themes replaced the lyricism of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* and the circumstantial detail of *The Song of the Lark*. Since she turned away from the analytic style of Henry James, Cather had always tried to write simply and resonantly. Her writing had the solid architecture of brick or stone. In a brief 1920 essay "On the Art of Fiction," she decried writing that dazzled the reader with "sharp photographic detail" and "taught us to multiply our ideas instead of to condense them." Summing up, she says: "Art, it seems to me, should simplify."

When Jim Burden describes his grandfather's prayers in *My Ántonia*, he notes: "He had the gift of simple and moving expression. Because he talked so little, his words had a peculiar force; they were not worn dull from constant use." In a tribute to the short story writer Katherine Mansfield in *Not Under Forty*, Cather described the writer's way of approaching "the major forces of life through comparatively trivial incidents. She chose a small reflector to throw a luminous streak out into the shadowy realm of personal relationships." Such oblique, miniaturizing effects intensify the mystery and impact of Marian Forrester's sketchy history in *A Lost Lady*.

The Mansfield essay, first published in 1925, provides an especially good gloss on the tragic themes of Cather's middle-period novels. It contrasts "the group life" of any family with "another—secret and passionate and intense—which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends." In this interior life, she says, each of us

> is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have woven about him. One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them.

This is as true for Niel Herbert as for Marian Forrester, for Professor St. Peter as for Myra Henshawe. In the end they are all mismatched, disappointed. Life's bright romantic promise has not panned out for them. Cather was not one of Freud's admirers, but she came to share his view of the tragic conflict between the inner child, with its illimitable needs, and the social self—what St. Peter thinks of as "the secondary social man," which he has begun to slough off.

The clash between the unbounded horizon of desire and the limits of actual life was a subject not only for Freud but also for the English Romantic poets who were among Cather's favorite reading. It was the theme of Wordsworth's most powerful poems, including "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," and it recurs everywhere in Keats and Shelley. The spirit of Keats especially broods over *A Lost Lady*. From his earliest poems to his late letters to Fanny Brawne, Keats himself goes from idealizing women to lashing out at them. The elusive women, half-temptress, half-goddess, in works like Keats's *Lamia* or "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" are wonderful examples of "the magic of contradictions," but also of male ambivalence toward woman's nature. Niel Herbert is first intoxicated with Marian Forrester, then bitterly disenchanted with her, and finally baffled by her. At the end he wonders whether her bright vitality

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represented life's genuine promise or was simply an illusion, an effect of artifice and stagecraft.

In "her best days," he recalls, "her eyes, when they laughed for a moment into one's own, seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life." He imagines conjuring her up as a young woman, so that he can "demand the secret of that ardour; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting." The very language here—the ardor, the skepticism, the longing for permanence—is Keatsian to the core. So is the question Niel dreams of asking, which the novel itself does ask, without imagining that it can be answered.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was so taken with *A Lost Lady* that he feared it would look like he had plagiarized it in his portrait of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. Cather graciously dismissed his concern. In fact both writers were devoted readers of Keats and they intuitively grasped the real spirit of Romantic poetry, which was less the celebration of nature in *O Pioneers!* or the Virgilian pastoral of *My Ántonia* than the divided consciousness of Keats's odes, charged with questions rather than affirmations. *A Lost Lady* combines Cather's plangent sense of the past with her ambiguous, skeptical feeling about life's possibilities. The novel conjures up the shade of the young Marian Forrester just as Keats plumbs the mystery of the Nightingale or the Grecian Urn with queries they cannot answer. Niel tries to cordon off the past, to arrest it in its flight; in his great odes, Keats's speakers confront an image of their desire as its ecstatic energy slips away from them.

> Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

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The art of the Baule people

by Karen Wilkin

It is comforting to remember, given the depressing results of postmodernism's refusal to make distinctions between the detritus of popular culture and anything else, that part of what made Modernist art modern—and radical—in the first place was its deliberate embrace of materials without art-historical precedent and sources of inspiration remote from the time-honored subject matter of Western art. Modernists at the beginning of this century explored the possibilities of everything from newspaper to scrap metal, from the debris on café tables to the ritual objects of Africa, seizing them as both raw materials and points of departure that permitted or provoked unprecedented formal inventions.

Adopting "non-art" materials and prototypes was obviously a self-conscious declaration of independence from tradition. Part of African sculpture's fascination for Picasso, for example, was its distance from the Greco-Roman aesthetic heritage that he had been trained to revere. Its attraction was its exoticism, its "primitivism"—in the sense of springing from a culture apparently disconnected from European bourgeois values—transgressive qualities reinforced by the fact that seeing African sculpture and masks in any quantity in 1906 Paris required a visit not to the sacrosanct Louvre but to the ethnographic museum. Of course, the games Picasso played with words and fragments of words visible on the pasted papers of his collages were not accidents; neither were the absorbing questions about the meaning of reality he raised by including real ball fringe or absinthe spoons in his constructions. But what really seems to have engaged him was the sculptural freedom with which African carvers treated the body, turning hollows into protrusions and rounded forms into angular ones, and generally reinventing proportions and anatomy. It was unforgettable to a young artist looking for ways to subvert his own facility and unlearn the hard-won lessons of a conventional art education. Generally, Picasso seems to have been less concerned with the original function and meaning of the African artifacts he admired, their liberating aura of the exotic and the "primitive" notwithstanding, than with how they could feed his own art. John Richardson's biography makes a convincing case for Picasso's being profoundly superstitious and susceptible to the mysterious and the charged, so he probably liked the notion that tribal objects had ritual significance, but it seems clear from the evidence of his work that Picasso's interest in African sculpture was largely aesthetic—and the same could be said of most of the other African enthusiasts among his colleagues. (The Surrealists, with their pleasure in hidden meanings, were another matter, but they came later to African and Oceanic art and, in any case, they could be just as engaged by odd machines and ambiguous natural objects.)

Of course, the compelling question is

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why, at a particular moment in the first decade of the twentieth century, a group of adventurous young artists should have started to look at African carvings as works of art and not simply as anthropological relics, just as about half a century earlier, a previous generation started thinking about Japanese prints not as strange, foreign "cultural productions," but as clues to organizing pictures. Whatever the answer, the transformation of African artifacts from ethnographic curiosities to significant works of sculpture, in the eyes of Western viewers, is as permanent a legacy of Picasso and his colleagues as the complexities of Cubist space. Yet it is surprising how recent this transformation is. One of my professors at Columbia, admittedly not a young man, was a pioneer in distinguishing African tribal art through stylistic differences and formal nuances—which is to say, by means that any art historian would apply to any sculpture. Soon after taking his course, I went to the British Museum eager to see works I had studied and found myself crouching in a corridor of the ethnography department, peering at sculptures shelved two deep, behind dusty glass doors. Nothing unusual about this for a study collection, but it was the permanent display. Only over the past two decades or so has it become commonplace for African (and Oceanic and Native American) works to be shown prominently in major art museums and special institutions of their own, cherished as glorious examples of the sculptor's art.

This shift ought to delight lovers of African art but, paradoxically, aestheticizing even the most spectacular, refined tribal objects raises new and perplexing questions. Is something missed if African sculpture is viewed simply as sculpture? Take, for example, the exhibitions at the Musée Dapper in Paris, a jewelbox devoted to African art, tucked improbably into the courtyard of an haut-bourgeois apartment house in the Seizième. Everything shown at the Dapper is treated with maximum reverence. The cases would look fine at Cartier or Hermès. Subtle lighting emphasizes delicate incised patterns, sculptural articulations, and surface inflections. Elegant, unobtrusive labels record tribal origin, approximate date, materials, provenance, and, occasionally, when the work was collected; otherwise you're on your own. It's always a pleasure to go to the Dapper because the quality of the work on view is so high, but at the same time, you're always left with unanswered questions about what the ravishing, but deracinated objects on view might have meant in the world that produced them. I remember a wonderful show of spoons with elaborately carved handles—everything from enormous paddles and scoops to intricately decorated "teaspoons"—that kept me entranced for several hours and sent me away wondering, since almost everything was in mint condition, how or when or even *if* these gorgeous, seemingly utilitarian objects were used. (More about this later.)

You can argue, of course, that Western museums are filled with things wrenched from their original contexts: Greek sculptures removed from once-sacred precincts, Medieval altarpieces detached from altars, fragments of Renaissance polyptychs made to stand on their own, "homeless" eighteenth-century portraits, and so on. But most people who make the effort to visit Western museums have some sense of how the European objects on exhibit were used and what they mean. Many of them, it goes without saying, are literally iconic and instantly intelligible, but even when the specifics of subject matter or meaning are obscure—when even specialists are uncertain about just what is going on in a picture—most museum goers have little difficulty telling a devotional image from a purely decorative one. And they are usually quite aware of which artists and works of art are regarded as stellar within the Western canon. When you are confronted with the art of non-European cultures—with African art, for example—more information is both needed and wanted. Yet how can that information be provided without relegating

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African sculpture once again to the realm of anthropological specimen?

Anyone lucky enough to have frequented New York's Museum for African Art knows the answer to that question. Since 1985, when it was founded as the Center for African Art on East 68th Street—the name changed when it moved to Soho in 1994—the Museum has set a standard for exhibitions that give full weight to both aesthetics and context. Shows at the Museum have consistently delighted the eye and enriched understanding, addressing issues not only of aesthetic excellence, but of meaning, intention, function, and even, in an eye-testing installation a year or so ago, of the identity of individual carvers. The Museum's excellent Fall exhibition, "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes," which examined the "private art" of the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, was in many ways its most ambitious and comprehensive solution to the problem to date.[1]

The Baule are celebrated carvers whose sophisticated, elegant sculptures and masks, with their crisp profiles and swelling forms, have long figured importantly in major collections of African art. The absence of Baule pieces in a museum's African holdings would be as conspicuous as the absence of Rodin's work in a collection of nineteenth-century European sculpture. Baule carvings of alert male and female figures, with their tautly flexed knees, their arms pressed to their sides, and their delicately poised heads held tensely above slender necks, are emblematic of the best of African art. So are the dazzling masks of the Baule, which range from complex near-abstract structures that evoke mythical animal heads to solemn human faces with long, narrow noses, hooded eyes, elaborately grooved hair patterns, and decoratively wrapped beards. If such works seem familiar, it is not only because of their prominence in museum displays and because they are such powerful objects, aesthetically. It is also because of the enormous influence Baule sculpture exerted on Modernist art before the First World War. It is impossible to look at a Baule figure without thinking about Picasso and Brancusi or to look at a portrait mask without thinking about Modigliani.

Yet for the Baule people, we are told by Susan M. Vogel, the exhibition's curator (and former director of the Museum for African Art) who has devoted a lifetime to studying their work, the notion of "art" in the Western sense does not exist. Even the act of looking at a work—the act upon which any museum exhibition or even curatorial research depends—has surprising connotations in Baule culture. It is considered disrespectful for younger people to look directly at their elders and life-threatening for the wrong person to see especially sacred works. "A woman accidentally gazing on a sacred men's mask would die unless extraordinary measures were taken," Vogel tells us. What is truly fascinating is that seeing is considered to be potentially more dangerous than direct contact; "a blind woman accidentally touching [a sacred men's mask] in its sanctuary . . . might be harmed only by the knowledge of what she had touched, not by the physical contact itself." Even works that can be looked at without danger are seen only on special occasions—masks that are used in dances, for example, or funeral regalia that is brought out in honor of a particularly important person—and even here the link between fixed looking and disrespect that applies to children's behavior seems to operate as well.

"Baule: African Art/Western Eyes" tried to do the impossible: to exhibit what Vogel terms "art designed to be un-seen" and by, encouraging people to look closely at it, not only to make clear its merits, significance, and function, but also to suggest how it was perceived by the Baule themselves. The genesis of the show is recounted in the in-

1 "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes" was on view at The Museum for African Art, New York, from September 11, 1998 until January 3, 1999. A catalogue of the exhibit, by Susan M. Vogel, has been published by Yale University Press (256 pages, $45).

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formative book that accompanied the exhibition in lieu of a catalogue. During the past twenty-five years, Vogel has spent extended periods in Ivory Coast villages, in an effort to study important works as they were meant to function in Baule life. Sometimes, despite the cooperation and assistance of people like the exhibition's consultant, Koffi Nguessan, Vogel felt that she was having little success. She came to realize that her frustration was caused by an inherent quality of her subject. "I recognized," she writes, "that my difficulty in seeing artworks in the village context demonstrated a central facet of the great Baule art tradition: art objects are hidden. My subsequent research has focused on solving the absurdly fundamental paradox of creating an exhibition of artworks that are seldom shown, and of writing a book on art as it is experienced by people who do not consider it 'art.'"

Both the resulting exhibition at the Museum of African Art and its related book aimed to make non-African audiences sharpen their awareness and question their assumptions. By providing an inkling of how the society that made and uses these works regards them, "Baule: African Art/ Western Eyes" made viewers aware of the immense gap between the perceptions of the traditional Baule and late-twentieth century Americans, and, at the same time, allowed them to see, however indistinctly, across that gap. Since Baule village life has apparently changed dramatically in the past decade, this effort to encapsulate traditional beliefs and practices is all the more important and poignant.

The show was divided into sections that dissected various notions of "seeing" within Baule culture, beginning with works, such as dance masks, that are meant to be viewed in public. The installation contrasted the way we are accustomed to seeing such works presented in museums—as precious objects isolated for scrutiny and delectation—with the way they might typically have been encountered in a Baule village. In the section on "Art that is Watched," for example, a mannequin of a costumed dancer at rest, wearing a portrait mask with its surrounding, concealing "mane," decorative leggings, and elaborate ankle decorations, was juxtaposed with wall-mounted and showcased masks of a similar type. Wall texts by Vogel—a sympathetic, insightful, informed, but nonetheless Western curator—were complemented by the observations of her Baule consultant and translator Nguessan describing the woman for whom the mask had been made originally and the object's history.

There were also films of dances, showing masks and regalia in use, capturing the performance's sporadic bursts of energy, the insistent rhythms of the music, and the dancer's virtuoso footwork, and—perhaps most important—making evident how his taut, bent posture made the mask difficult to see. In addition, an elaborate tableau approximated the way a masked, costumed dancer would first appear to his audience, slowly revealed from behind a stretched cloth; shifting light emphasized the elusive quality of the moment. Theatrical? Of course. But theatrical with a purpose, since it vividly brought home the fact that in traditional Baule practice, such masks are not intended to be studied in isolation, but "watched" during the course of an event that exists over time and in space. Armed with this information, exhibition visitors had ample opportunity to look closely at the extremely fine selection of masks and sculptures presented in conventional ways, but I suspect none of us did so in quite the same way as before. Nothing however, not even learning that animal masks were usually worn by lesser dancers—teenagers in training, relegated to portraying prey in comic skits—could alter the sheer sculptural power of an exquisitely modulated ram's head mask or a delightfully ambiguous stylized human face surmounted by tall, beautifully tapered rabbit's ears.

Sometimes the information provided by the wall texts was not only interesting and surprising, but led you to examine your

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preconceptions. A highlight of the first part of the show was a seductive fragmentary torso, notable for smooth, elongated forms punctuated with delicately raised geometric scarifications. From the back, the piece was particularly compelling, because of its very slight *déhanchement* and its suavely inflected shoulder blades. From any view, it was completely satisfying to Western eyes in sculptural terms, despite its missing head, arms, and lower legs. It was startling, therefore, to learn that the piece was probably made in the 1920s or 1930s as a "decorative attraction" or as "a novelty to advertise a small business," and still more thought-provoking to discover that for Baule viewers, its damaged condition would render the sculpture meaningless, so that it would have been discarded, rather than admired.

A section entitled "Art that is Glimpsed: the Private" included many of the most characteristic sculptures in the show—upright, tense, seated or standing male and female figures familiar from museum collections and the like. These, we were told, are spirit wives and husbands, essentially private sculptures, seen only by intimates. The role of the spirit spouses is to watch over their human partners, bring them luck, help them get and keep a good earthly husband or wife, and ensure that their children are healthy, although it seems that they can also cause trouble and sometimes function as rivals to their human partners. Sculptures of spirit spouses represent an ideal, idealized person.

Is knowing this essential to enjoyment of Baule figure sculpture? The wall texts warned us, tacitly, against looking at spirit spouse sculptures, idealized or not, as keys to Baule aesthetic values. "We live with the spirits more than the statues," Koffi Nguessan reminded viewers. "We are aware that Baule art is beautiful but the aspect that interests us the most is the spiritual, religious side." This is antithetical to the way that the Modernist artists who "discovered" Baule sculpture in the early part of this century regarded the African works they admired —or any other works of art, for that matter. Matisse, for example, insisted that he didn't need to be told which scene from the Passion of Christ was represented by a Giotto fresco, since meaning was inherent in the picture's formal qualities. Formally, however, Baule sculptures of spirit spouses are indistinguishable from a type of devotional figure that is placed on shrines; even specialists cannot be certain which is which once they have been removed from their context. One indicator, we were told, is that spirit spouses usually have clean surfaces, while shrine figures—at least ones that haven't been sanitized for Western collectors—show traces of having been doused regularly with liquids during ritual use; this is what produces the rather threatening incrustations on some of the most mysterious objects in this part of the show.

There was no such ambiguity in the section of the exhibition devoted to "Art that is Seen Without Looking: the Sacred," a category including devotional images that combine human and animal traits in sinister ways and regalia that, in Baule tradition, can be viewed only by men. The "men only" sacred horned helmet masks, with their thrusting jaws lined with fierce teeth, were among the most astonishing works in the exhibition. Typically, a rounded, volumetric central mass—the helmet—is animated by the tension between a cluster of sharp-pointed cylinders springing from the back —the horns—and a squared-off open muzzle in front. The sculptural complexity of these masks is remarkable, as is their emotional resonance; they transcend time and culture. At the Museum for African Art, a group of these ferocious objects was installed apart from the rest of the show, in a dimly lit, small, enclosed space evocative of a sacred precinct—theatrical once again, but once again, effective. (I nearly missed the entrance on my first visit.) By contrast, an all but unintelligible, poor quality video tape of a women's sacred dance, forbidden to men, which was screened continuously in a small space tucked into a corner, seemed

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downright intrusive and made you wonder why the curators hadn't been content simply to mention that such dances existed.

The final section of the show, "Art that is Visible to All: the Profane," concentrated on objects made for daily use—loom pulleys, stools, fans, weights, and (yes, I said I would get to them) spoons. Their rich decorations often include motifs common on sacred or "glimpsed" objects, rendered in miniature, but surprisingly, there is no danger attached to viewing these images. It is not, however, that changes of context and scale subvert their meaning or neutralize their potency. Women, its appears, can safely look at tiny decorative versions of men's sacred masks, because it is assumed that, never having seen the real thing, they will not recognize the miniatures as replicas of powerful images. In fact, the decorative carvings on utilitarian objects were *meant* to be looked at closely, to be admired as evidence of the carver's inventiveness and skill. Vogel surmises that this is a response to the fact that much of the most important Baule art is "un-seen." A carver's finest efforts might be sacred or private sculptures, but few people would see—or what is more important, really *look* at—such objects. His skill would be visible to the community at large, however, if he also made wholly secular objects that would be handled and admired during ordinary activities or special occasions. This category includes pieces like the enchanting stool supported by a cheerful leopard in the Baule exhibition at the Museum for African Art or the spoons with anthropomorphic handles that so pleased and puzzled me at the Musée Dapper. The stool was apparently intended for the use of an important man at important events and designed through its luxury and beauty to confer prestige. As for the spoons: "They were used for eating, I was told," Vogel recounts, "especially by old people who had lost their teeth. There are too many beautifully carved spoons in good condition, however, for this to have been the general rule. Few show heavy use, and there is no plain utilitarian version. One must conclude that these were mainly carved . . . 'so that people would talk about them.'" "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes" should have made every visitor to the Museum for African Art "talk about them."

If you missed the show, Vogel's handsomely produced, lavishly illustrated book is the next best thing, full of illuminating interviews and, in addition to reproductions of the works in the exhibition (and additional works not exhibited), Vogel's own revealing field photographs documenting Baule village culture, both in the recent past and at present, including images of works of art in their traditional context. (I was particularly taken by a photo of a spirit wife, wearing a yellow painted bikini, carved in the 1960s, displayed for the camera by her dignified human spouse; she wasn't in the show, although in compensation there was a vigorously carved, dashing spirit husband on horseback, sporting a pith helmet.)

In a recent article about how movies represent historical events, Simon Schama pointed out that Hollywood's starting point is usually the assumption that the past is interchangeable with the present, so that characters in historical films demonstrate values, modes of behavior, and reactions identical to our own. Nothing could be more inaccurate, in Schama's view. What separates the past from the present is its uncanny otherness. "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes" made you acutely sensitive to the undeniable otherness of the art of the Baule people. But both the show and the book that accompanied it also made you aware that otherness is part of the strength and the beauty of Baule art.

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Three poems
by Gardner McFall

Seaweed weather

For three days we've been enveloped by rain
thrashing the house, flattening the sand dunes.
Battleship waves are crashing in tiers of porcelain,
dove-white foam that turns dirty-brown as it's strewn
over mountains of seaweed. Should we regret
the scant shore left? The current could swallow us whole.
The wind's exhale in the volleyball net
strains its fastenings and shakes the two poles.
Somewhere, halyards telegraph a high-pitched—
paean or jeremiad? As ligustrum knocks
the pane, an owl, rarely heard in these parts,
repeats there is nothing but trouble docked
here, alongside a wish, hunkering down
in seaweed weather, to ride the dark squall out.

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The body's colloquy

Inspiration to mind

Small bird, flying each day to the well
in search of water within your reach,
one dawn, the bucket will be hauled full

so you can bathe and drink your fill,
unsure on what disposition the gift
depends, but sustained by its thrill.

Mind to heart

Try to possess just one clear feeling,
not a clot—a single stream or shoot
of falling, mountain water, which pools

silt-settled in a deep-green spot,
apart, shot through with sunlight to
the bottom, where fish wreathe the rock.

Eye to hand

Regarding beauty, the world will not recite
or recollect my gaze transfixed upon
the full moon rising out of a phosphorous sea,

the coliseum, pyramids, or shrine at Delphi,
my lover's look, my child's wonder at the sun;
servant of sight, take up your pen and write!

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Sweet cure

A man, with a dozen small pieces of paper
compared to my two, knew I was waiting
behind him at the pharmacy xerox machine,
and might have said: "You have so few?
Please go ahead," but feigned ignorance.

I sighed, settling in hot-black impatience,
though he was under duress, documenting his health
for some insurance company bureaucrat.
I observed the back of his crimped neck—
its old man and the sea look, balding head

soft as a baby's, slumped shoulders,
trousers pulled up high with a tightened belt.
His hands unfurled the machine cover
time and again, placing each scrap square
in the center like a photo inside its frame.

I could have advised: fit two on a legal-size page.
Instead, I glanced over the store shelves,
lingered at the Q-tips and lotions,
the bright, flamingo children's aspirin of my youth.
I didn't know they were still being made.

I could see my mother's hand, popping the cap,
dropping two in my palm, taste their sweet,
tangy flight down my throat. How I slipped into bed,
fever lightened by Mother's caress. She sat
until I slept and must have had work to do, though

what, I'll never know. The man in front of me
gathered his papers and turned to leave
without acknowledging my presence in any way
just as I must have turned from my mother
to the wall and fallen into night's dreams.

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London journal

Coarseness & crudeness & correctness

by John Gross

During the French Revolution the aphorist Chamfort remarked that if you wanted to make sure that you were not going to encounter something more disgusting in the course of the day, you had to start off by swallowing a toad. In Britain right now, his advice is fairly easy to follow: the toads are regularly served up in the morning paper.

A few recent items from the British press, in no particular order:

- A leading actor, interviewed about a new production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, says that he only agreed to appear in it "if I could put a firework up the play's bum."

- A new film version of *Mansfield Park* is announced, to be produced by a commercial company in conjunction with the BBC. Among other delights, it will show Fanny Price "stripped to her underwear and made uncomfortable by a lesbian advance from her neighbor Mary Crawford." (This is pretty much in line with the BBC's recent television version of *Vanity Fair*, in which Becky Sharp was shown taking up her post as a governess and almost immediately teaching her young charges how to say "Kiss my arse" in French.)

- The Christian Advertising Network launches a national campaign for Easter with a red-and-black poster in which Christ is endowed with the unmistakable features of Che Guevara. The accompanying slogan reads "Meek. Mild. As If." The secretary of the Network—an ecumenical body, supported by all the major churches—explains that "We want to get away from the wimpy Nordic figure in a white nightie."

- When John Singer Sargent's portrait of Henry James was first exhibited in 1914, it was slashed by a suffragette. An art critic in *The Guardian*, recalling the incident, decides that it was "an act of misplaced literary criticism," since "it was James's sentences that needed cutting."

- Mo Mowlam, a famously down-to-earth member of Tony Blair's government, announces that she thinks the next Poet Laureate, following the death of Ted Hughes, ought to be Paul McCartney. ("We identify with him.")

It would be easy, all too easy, to go on. But let me be merciful and wind up my little list, concluding with a couple of items which happen to be in the papers on the morning I am writing—and not just anywhere, but in the two papers most committed to upholding traditional standards.

One of them, *The Daily Telegraph*, announces a year-long series in which critics are to pinpoint "the works of art which have changed the course of the past 99 years." The introductory article is accompanied by a large illustration in which a huddle of famous faces (you can make out Picasso, Stravinsky, etc.; also Tarentino, Bob Dylan, etc.) are dominated by a giant figure of Elvis Presley.

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Meanwhile, over at *The Times*, there is an article by the Renaissance scholar and ubiquitous cultural commentator Lisa Jardine triggered by one of the polls which are currently being held all over the place to select Men and Women of the Millennium. Her brief is to account for the fact that on this occasion Shakespeare came top; falling readily into the language of the supermarket, she explains that he was "a pick 'n' mix playwright, available to be redesigned from decade to decade." (Few days pass without the public being exposed to Professor Jardine's opinions. During a recent radio program she condemned the habit of reading on one's own as "onanistic"; or perhaps—in 1999 who can say?—the term was intended as a commendation.)

No doubt one must keep a sense of proportion. It could reasonably be urged that most of these specimens are rather small toads—stunts which are best ignored, bad jokes which are best forgotten. And considered one by one, so they are. But they add up. They contribute to the prevailing climate; they reveal a great deal about it.

The Guevara poster, for instance, is hardly likely to signal an upsurge in Liberation Theology. It speaks, rather, of churches which are losing their social role and have been left floundering, of a desperate (and almost certainly miscalculated) bid for attention in an increasingly alien environment.

Last Christmas brought home how little time the arbiters of our culture now have for beliefs or customs which not long ago all but the most belligerent nonbelievers would have treated with respect. On Christmas day, in spite of protests from the Church of England, BBC television failed to broadcast a single religious service: its peak-viewing program was an episode of a comedy series called *Men Behaving Badly* which is at least as crass as it sounds. Other channels, having laid special plans for the occasion, offered an unusually rich diet of horror films and soft porn.

On the higher cultural slopes, the Tate Gallery was exhibiting work by the winner of this year's Turner Prize. It included a series of pictures festooned with elephant dung, conspicuous among them one entitled *The Adoration of Captain Shit and the Black Stars*—which could certainly be said to have been striking a seasonal note, after a fashion. (Elsewhere more attention was paid to religious sensitivities: the authorities in Birmingham, Britain's second largest city, decreed that in order not to offend Hindus, Muslims, and other religious minorities all official references to Christmas were to be dropped and replaced by invitations to celebrate something called "Winterval.")

It may or may not be relevant that up and down the country church buildings are being subjected to an unprecedented degree of burglary and vandalism. (The Church of England's official insurers estimate that on average a dozen Anglican churches alone are vandalized *every day*: historic stained-glass is a particularly favored target.) What is certain, on the other hand, is that the celebrated Millennium Dome, supposed symbol of all our hopes, is proving as inhospitable to religion as critics predicted. While other features of the Dome are roaring ahead—we now know, for instance, that the approach to the building will be dominated by a giant McDonald's restaurant—the so-called Spirit Zone is struggling for funds; and within the Zone itself, the emphasis seems likely to fall on non-specific spirituality with New Age trimmings and a dash of science fiction.

Another field of endeavor which has found an inadequate welcome in the Dome—which so far, indeed, has failed to find any welcome at all—is literature. Official bodies such as the British Council and publishers' organizations have complained that the place looks set to be a "book-free zone," and that their requests for meetings with the New Millennium Experience Company (motto: "Discovery, Learning, Fascination and Fun") have been turned down. Given what the New Millennium might make of literature if it took it up, this is perhaps something to be grateful for—benign neglect. In any case, my guess is that some kind of last minute gesture will

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be arranged. And meanwhile the Dome has a new "supremo," following the temporary fall from grace of Peter Mandelson. A largely unknown lawyer (and former schoolmate of the Prime Minister) called Lord Falconer, he is renowned among his friends, we are told, for his encyclopedic knowledge of rock music trivia.

The juggernaut progress of popular culture remains a constant feature of the cultural scene. So does the erosion of collective memory, the snapping of links with the past—a process which has accelerated under a government frantic for "modernization." A recent article by one of the editors of *The English Historical Review*, John Maddicott, has caused a stir by drawing attention to how matters stand, not only at the high school level but in his own university, Oxford, where it is now possible to take a degree in history without knowing anything about Magna Carta or the Reformation or the Reform Act of 1832. Maddicott's critics have retorted that the previous Oxford history syllabus was excessively whiggish and Anglocentric (which it was), but they haven't denied the truth of his claims.

It isn't only remoter historical periods which are neglected. At the popular level, whenever a poll is taken to determine the best this or that of the twentieth century, it is striking how heavily the results are weighted towards the latter part of the century. The Post Office, for example, has just conducted a poll to choose the greatest hero of the century, with a view to issuing commemorative stamps: the winner was Mother Teresa, with Princess Diana as runner-up. And the extent to which the recent past is a closed book, even in quarters where one might have hoped for better things, is one of the principal lessons to be learned from the curious case of the bust of Arthur Koestler.

When Koestler died in 1983, he left a large sum of money to the University of Edinburgh. As a mark of gratitude, the university decided to display a bust of him in a corridor. Last Autumn, however, a new biography was published (*Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*, by David Cesarani) giving extensive details of his ill-treatment of women, and going as far as to describe him as a rapist. Shortly afterwards a group of female students complained about the presence of the bust. (According to their spokesman, they felt "uneasy under its gaze.") They demanded that it be removed at once, and the university authorities meekly acceded.

Whether the biography gives a fair impression of Koestler, and how far its use of a term like "rapist" is justified, are questions open to discussion, but it can hardly be denied that there were aspects of his behavior that no civilized person could condone. Let us even grant, for the sake of argument, that the students were right to demand the removal of the bust. He was still Koestler, however; and anyone who had made such a demand, if he or she had had any idea what his career represents, would at the very least surely have tempered outrage with regret. Instead, if reports are correct, the students' spokesman simply huffed and puffed about a serial abuser being "glorified in the halls of fame." No hint of Koestler's moral heroism, or why it mattered; no whisper of *Darkness at Noon*.

The whole episode is depressing but also comic (I wonder what has happened to the bust), and the comedy is heightened by the fact that it took place in Edinburgh—the city where the annual festival, on its theatrical side, features a hundred varieties of scabrous humor; the setting of one of the key books (alas) of the age, Irvine Welsh's unremittingly scatological novel *Trainspotting*. While the tremulous protestors were averting their eyes from Koestler's gaze, coarseness and crudeness and drugginess were bubbling all around them.

Which is much the way life goes on elsewhere in Britain today. Progress is truly a wonderful thing: on the one hand, political correctness and all its concomitants flourish, on the other we live increasingly in the land of men (and women) behaving badly and fireworks up your bum.

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Theater

Sad, perfunctory, mechanical

by Mark Steyn

Once upon a time, a glamorous screen siren breezing into town for a rare stage appearance could reliably expect to be brutally savaged by London drama critics, even the straight ones. Years of grueling fringe theater in the upstairs rooms of pubs in obscure outlying boroughs, years of exposure to nudity on the stage—where on the whole the people who take their clothes off are the people you'd rather didn't—all this had left them with no use for such banal Hollywood values as flawless skin, defoliated armpits, firm breasts, etc. But last year, when *The Blue Room* opened at the Donmar Warehouse with Nicole Kidman, she brought out the kid in every man. "Stunning," said *The Daily Mail*'s Christopher Tookey. "Pure theatrical Viagra," said *The Daily Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer. Was that a rolled-up copy of the *Telegraph* in his pocket or was he just pleased to see her? Hard to tell. Fortunately, the *Evening Standard* sent along a lady correspondent to peer through the sea of middle-aged male drooling and apply a more rigorous critical dissection:

"Narrow hips, bosoms at armpit level, long rangy legs . . ."
Er, thanks, but how about the play?
"No—repeat, no—cellulite . . ."
And the direction?
"I was concentrating on her removing her bra under her vest . . ."
Anything to say about the design?
"No unsightly chicken-joint effect in the high-cut front . . ."
Well, that's a relief.

For the record, and the handful of New Yorkers dumb enough to care about what play they're seeing, *The Blue Room* is David Hare's update of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*. The disadvantage of most recent movie-star ventures into hot-ticket legit is an obvious one: if you want to see Ralph Fiennes in *Hamlet* or Kevin Spacey in *The Iceman Cometh*, you still have to, alas, sit through *Hamlet* or *The Iceman Cometh*. By contrast, for a Hollywood actress in search of a hype-able stage vehicle—a cause celeb—*La Ronde* is almost too perfect. Even those who've never seen the play or Max Ophul's film (1950) recognize the title and understand what it means—a roundelay of transitory sex, in which the Whore lures the Soldier, the Soldier picks up the Chambermaid, the Chambermaid seduces the Young Gentleman, and so on, until the whole thing comes full circle and the Count catches the eye of the Whore.

The same theme is dealt with more pointedly in John LaTouche's tongue-twisting lyric for "Ringaroundrosy" in Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, which drolly follows the progress of a sexually transmitted disease from one coupling to the next. Indeed, that would seem more pointedly topical than Schnitzler's version. But, a century after it was written, *Reigen* (the original

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German title, though for obvious reasons the English-speaking world is more susceptible to the French) retains its potency as a hit property for two reasons: first, to the modern directorial sensibility, the play is a protean concept piece; secondly, it's about sex, as these days everything is. *La Ronde* was also a scandal and therefore "ahead of its time": the first German production in 1921 provoked riots, and thereafter the play languished unseen for decades. In 1982, the copyright expired and in Britain, within three months, there were three stage productions and a TV adaptation. Of the legitimate trio—by the RSC, the Royal Exchange, and Shared Experience—the last was closest to Hare's version: all ten characters were played by the same two actors, as if to emphasize the artifice and role-playing inherent in Schnitzler's premise. Hare follows the same principle and updates the stock characters of Habsburg Vienna to what he sees as their Nineties equivalents: now, the whore (some things never change) lures a London cabbie who picks up an au pair girl who seduces an Oxbridge student, and so on.

But, given that the whore and the au pair and the married woman and the supermodel are all played by the leggy, auburn Nicole Kidman, why worry about the play? "The vision of her wafting around the stage with a fag in one hand and her knickers in the other as a delicious French au pair will haunt my fantasies for months," continued Charles Spencer at length, until one of his keepers positioned in the balcony managed to fire off a tranquilizer dart.

Incidentally, in case Miss Kidman's attorneys are planning to take Spencer to the cleaners, it should be explained that the reference to "a fag in one hand" is Brit-speak for "cigarette" and not an allusion to her diminutive husband, Tom Cruise. Despite the insinuations of the London press, Mr. Cruise is not gay, nor is he sterile, nor is he *that* short—as his phalanx of lawyers is at pains to point out. But he does get $20 million per picture, so, if his wife wants to dabble in a little Equity-minimum fringe theater now and then, he can afford to indulge her.

At the Donmar, *The Blue Room* exemplified the kind of calculated miscegenation the London theater enjoys: a cool movie name, a hotshot young director, a respectable established playwright, a classic property. . . Somehow in New York the same process always goes awry: you get a tired property, a tatty production, somebody who used to be in a daytime soap, and you wind up with something like the recent revival of *Grease*. But in London Miss Kidman found herself a plausible vehicle and the rest of us got a pleasant end-of-season diversion. The *Evening Standard* annual theater awards recognized as much by giving its Best Actress prize to the comparatively unglamorous Sinead Cusack and honoring Miss Kidman with a special award for "attracting people to the theater"—an award that was accepted on Miss Kidman's behalf by her naked bottom.

What's happened in New York is almost precisely the opposite: sniffily regarding the London reviews as a breach of professional standards, the critics have disdained the Charles Spencer approach, but everyone else has eagerly taken it up. When I saw Miss Kidman in London, she was never at any point technically entirely nude, though her co-star Iain Glen was: it's one of the curious distinctions of live theater that these days male nudity is far more routine than female. But for the Broadway transfer (at the Cort) it was felt that, for three—count 'em—seconds, Miss Kidman should be completely naked, albeit deep in shadows, and somehow the three-second nakedness of Miss Kidman has become the entire production. At the Donmar Warehouse, audiences at least pretended to be there for the play, and pre- and post-show lobby conversation dealt with the difficulties of adapting Schnitzler's worldliness for the Nineties, etc.

At the Cort, by contrast, most male and quite a few female theatergoers have their opera glasses at the ready twenty minutes

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beforehand, like spectators at Cape Canaveral not wanting to miss a moon shot. *The New York Post* has run items delineating the various degrees of exclusivity: just getting in isn't enough, any more than it is when the swank restaurant takes your reservation and then gives you the table by the toilet; according to the *Post*, you haven't really seen *The Blue Room* unless you land seats which afford you a view not only of Miss Kidman's bare butt but of her breasts, too. Colluding in the hype, *Newsweek* put the actress on the cover alongside the headline "Nicole Kidman Bares All." In, say, the Clinton house organ *Hustler*, such a claim could safely be taken at face value. But, inevitably, inside *Newsweek* Miss Kidman was fully clothed and baring all only metaphorically—not to say paradoxically, given that she was baring all chiefly about her need to retain her privacy. In its way, the *Newsweek* profile reached an exquisitely platonic level of puff: a come-on for a revealing interview in which the interviewee reveals only that she doesn't intend to reveal anything plugging a show operating in pretty much the same disingenuous way.

But so what? We should be grateful to Miss Kidman for putting the "tease" back in striptease to a degree not seen since Gypsy Rose Lee. That said, however, the hype is a sad indictment of contemporary New Yorkers, who in their stampede to the Cort have been acting like farmhands at a turn-of-the-century county fair. The theater is admittedly star-starved, but it's worth pointing out that, though Miss Kidman appears in movies, she is not quite a movie star. In Hollywood, her breakthrough roles never quite break through, and her luster derives mainly from being Mrs. Tom Cruise. But she acquits herself well in the five roles she plays in *The Blue Room* and we should not begrudge her her wish to take them. Though she made her professional stage debut in an Australian production of *Spring Awakening*, Wedekind's tale of nineteenth-century sexual repression, in Hollywood a certain sameness has set in: she was the twenty-two-year old world-renowned neurosurgeon in *Days of Thunder*, the twenty-seven-year old world-renowned psychiatrist in *Batman Forever*, the twenty-nine-year old world-renowned nuclear scientist in *The Peacemaker*—or, to use the technical term for these roles, "the girl." But, though Miss Kidman brings a commanding conviction to *The Blue Room*, the real shock of the production is to discover that the raw material is mostly as clunky and witless as her Hollywood stuff.

Nothing Miss Kidman does here comes close to her sly, satirical turn as Suzanne, the perky but homicidal weather girl in the 1995 film *To Die For*. But to rise above the cardboard cut-outs of Hare's script does constitute a triumph of sorts. Her co-star's nudity is more robust, less chiaroscuro, and at times dangerously acrobatic—which, in casting terms, makes a kind of sense. Iain Glen is an admired stage actor but, next to Miss Kidman, virtually anonymous—no *Newsweek* covers for him. So the boldness of his nudity, alongside his leading lady's shadow dancing, helps redress the balance: they have a real and equitable chemistry. But the chemistry extends to nothing more than a series of cold, forlorn seductions.

Schnitzler's structure tends to shallowness, but the contrast between public and private—between the rococo refinements of Viennese society and the coarser urges of its citizens at all levels—gives you something to get your teeth into. Today, there's little social elegance and the coarser urges are all upfront and hailed as something to celebrate: in an age when female rock stars hire personal trainers to sire their children, the tensions between class and sex are more elusive. In a sharper contemporary transposition of Schnitzler, one of the transient encounters would have been gay, another might have involved the favorite turkey baster of a maternally-minded lesbian film star. But, if anything, this version's types are even flatter and more obvious than the original's. Hare has never been very good on sex (see *Skylight*, etc.), and in this instance he's contented himself

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with taking a clever trifle and reducing it to the opportunity to see Miss Kidman get, as the British say, shagged senseless: he's made a mounting out of a molehill. The text struggles to sound smart and cynical but is instead crass and charmless. Sam Mendes's production is a void—a harsh neon cell that looks like an unpopular branch of Hooters on a quiet night. Adding to the sports bar atmosphere is a scorecard, which flashes the length of each coupling up on the wall. Thus, the progress we have made from the last fin-de-siècle to this.

And, insofar as the ballyhooed *Blue Room* has any significance, perhaps that's it. During the long first year of the world's longest sex scandal, a certain class of Clinton defender liked to bemoan the fact that Americans weren't as sophisticated about these things as the Europeans. At this point, according to the recently adopted twenty-eighth Amendment to the Constitution, it's traditional to cite as evidence of sophistication Mitterand's wife and his mistress standing side by side at his funeral. Personally, I'm tempted to call the Clintonites' bluff on this one, and demand that, since they're so keen on this example, at the President's funeral the First Lady be required to stand alongside Monica and Gennifer and all other interested parties and see how comfortable they are with this approach in practice. The truth is that the "everyone does it" school of cynicism aspires to the Continental sophistication of *La Ronde* but comes out closer to a provincial tour of *When Did You Last See Your Trousers?* or *Run For Your Wife*. The only Continental aspect of this Benny Hill presidency is that every scandal has to run at *Götterdämmerung* length.

Throughout 1997, when inspiration flagged, the tonier talk shows on NPR dragged in some passing director, such as Peter Brook, to explain why his Shakespeare production was supremely relevant to events in Washington. The arguments are rarely convincing, if only because Bill-and-Monica so obviously has bus-&-truck written all over it. But not until David Hare took on Schnitzler did the gulf between the Clinton defenders' Continental aspirations and humdrum reality find a truly fitting theatrical form: intentionally or not, in reducing Schnitzler to the sad, perfunctory, mechanical, non-erotic sex bouts on display here, Hare has provided an uncanny mirror of the pitiful state of sexual adventure in our own times.

The orgasm, said Malcolm Muggeridge long before it became a commonplace, has replaced the Cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment. So it's not surprising that no sooner has one gay Bible tale ended than another begins. *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (at the New York Theater Workshop) is by Paul Rudnick, an amusing stage and screen writer whose starting point is what's become to him a routine rebuke from Christian fundamentalists: God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. Who sez? says Rudnick. Suppose He did create Adam and Steve and, in addition, a lesbian couple called Jane and Mabel. If you've seen Rudnick's film *In and Out*, a round-up of Barbra Streisand jokes and other merciless gay stereotyping, you'll know what you're in for: a bitchy, malicious romp from the Garden of Eden to the East Village in the age of gay marriage, gay parenting, and AIDS. *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* is far more sharply offensive than the sappy *Corpus Christi* was, but so far Rudnick and his theater seem to have attracted not even a single death threat. While I like Rudnick and wish him well, I find this a rather sad state of affairs, since it suggests religious groups consider comedy to be unworthy of their attention: I don't know whether the Catholic League is homophobic, but it's clear they're not in the least comedophobic.

At Lincoln Center, the sex is of a more traditional variety. Ship me somewhere east of Suez, wrote Kipling, where there aren't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst. True, he also said a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke, and Mr. Clinton seems to have decisively

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scotched that one. But the idea that life far from home is less constrained retains its allure even in these permissive times: after Kipling and Maugham, after *Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*, A. R. Gurney has finally decided to dip his toe in the warmer waters of the East. *Far East* (at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theatre) acknowledges that its theme has become something of a cliché by flourishing ironic Japonica at every turn. We are in Japan, at a U.S. naval base, in 1954—and, as Captain Anderson (Bill Smitrovich) punningly remarks, officers in the Orient can become disoriented. All three men—Anderson, Lieutenant Sparky Watts, and Ensign Bob Munger—succumb, in one way or another, to the pleasures of exotic flesh, but we never see their partners. The only female character glimpsed is Mrs. Anderson (Lisa Emery), who went to Smith and is at least as disoriented as any of the guys. Otherwise, the Japanese members of the cast move furniture, serve as anonymous receptionists and golf caddies, wear kimonos, and bang wood-blocks, providing a kabuki-lite framing for a caucasian drama. For Gurney, a restrained long-time chronicler of frosty Waspiness who's never got further east than Kennebunk, these touches are surely the staging equivalent of the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*.

Sparky (Michael Hayden), a chipper college boy with a big brewery inheritance coming his way, has taken up with a Japanese waitress, much to the chagrin of an all too obviously frustrated Mrs. Anderson; Captain Anderson pines for a Filipina he once shacked up with during the war, before his son was killed. The variation on the theme is provided by Bob, who's seduced by a local man and is blackmailed into leaking classified information about U.S. involvement in what was then still called Indochina. Sparky cannot condone what his friend has done: "I can't lie," he says. "I can't live with that." But it's Bob's self-justifications that carry more contemporary echoes. Offered a face-saving general discharge, he says bitterly that nevertheless "it will stop me becoming President of General Motors or any major company." Bob seems momentarily regretful on learning that one of the U.S. agents he betrayed has been killed, but his concern is not professional but sexual integrity. In some countries, he'd have been hanged for treason, but even the benign cover of a general discharge apparently doesn't excuse the military's and society's homophobia.

Despite the modish gay gloss, there's something almost quaint about Gurney's play. It has, as always, some well-tuned lines, but, despite two fine performances by Michael Hayden and Bill Smitrovich, there's a lack of sexual crackle in the scenes with Lisa Emery that gives the production the fatal air of a drama with nothing at stake. As a reminder of the yawning chasm between now and the day before yesterday, the play is bookended by Jo Stafford's Hit Parade blockbuster of the early Fifties:

> See the pyramids along the Nile
> Watch the sun rise on a tropic isle
> Just remember, darling, all the while
> You Belong To Me . . .

What a quaint notion. Not only is possession no longer nine-tenths of sexual law, but it's effectively ceased to exist. As *The Blue Room* makes all too plain, it's all short-term rentals now.

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Art

Five painters

by Mario Naves

The retrospective of paintings by Jackson Pollock at the Museum of Modern Art was organized as an effort to define a figure whose place in twentieth-century art has long been formidable. In its scale and presentation, the MOMA show milks both Pollock the artist (ambitious, tumultuous, and flawed) and Pollock the myth (heroic, hard-drinking, and radical) to impressive, if not altogether convincing, effect. Reviews of the exhibition itself have been, on the whole, laudatory, yet the new consensus on Pollock's "mastery" is less certain. Put another way: man and myth aren't as inextricably linked as they once may have been. Even defenders of the status quo admit that Pollock was, at best, an erratic painter. Do I recall correctly one critic stating that Pollock painted only three or four good pictures? Out of a hundred or so at MOMA? Art isn't a matter of bean counting, but such statements signal a turn in the artist's reputation. While it is doubtful that our museums will be sliding their Pollocks into the storage racks anytime soon, it is worth recalling that commemorations of an artist's oeuvre sometimes run contrary to their organizers' intentions.

I was reminded of the vagaries of reputation while attending the exhibition "Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn"—on view at the Jewish Museum until March 7. It can scarcely be said that Shahn's work has occupied a prominent place in artistic thought since his death in 1969 (he was born in 1898). Yet he was once considered an American classic, a painter whose work was widely collected—lauded by no less a discerning eye than Alfred Barr, Jr. To get an idea of Shahn's stature during his lifetime, consider the fact that he and Willem de Kooning represented the United States at the 1954 Venice Biennale. If we are at all likely to think of Shahn today, it is through the obligatory mention of social realism in surveys of twentieth-century American art. Given how his art has dated, the late Nineties seem a curious time to revive Shahn's work. The organizers of "Common Man, Mythic Vision" may have felt that the artist's "humanist content" would garner a sympathetic audience from the politically inclined segments of the art world. I would guess, however, that even the most charitable of postmodernist ideologues will find Shahn's art unbearably hokey.

Which is, in fact, exactly what it is. There are two ways to approach Shahn's paintings: as artifacts of midcentury progressive sentiment or as camp. Certainly the latter is the case with a work like *Age of Anxiety* (1953). Few contemporary viewers will experience this portrayal of existential tsuris—with its portentous references to religion, philosophy, and alienation, the latter embodied in the form of a bathing beauty—as anything other than kitsch. Even Shahn's vaunted social realism lacks the incisive skepticism of a good political cartoon. Shahn was, in the

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end, a proficient and sentimental illustrator who appropriated a variety of modernist tropes—de Chirico's skewed spaces, Klee's scratchy line—without pushing them beyond pastiche. (This is always the problem with appropriators.)

The most revealing moment in the exhibition comes in a video of the artist explaining his break from a youthful embrace of Cézanne's art. Shahn repudiated the French master, it turns out, because he shared nothing with Cézanne in terms of biographical particulars. This is, to put it mildly, missing the point. It does go some way, however, in explaining why his "mythic vision" carries with it the musty odor of a bygone age. The most the viewer is likely to recall of Shahn's work upon exiting the Jewish Museum is the dull blur of piety.

Piety and social realism are attributes we also associate with the painter Jacob Lawrence. Like Shahn's, Lawrence's art concerns itself with (in his words) "man's continuous struggle to lift his social position and add dimension to his spiritual being." But Lawrence is, by far, a greater artist and a singular figure in twentieth-century art. The modern era hasn't been the most accommodating of epochs for the history painter, but Lawrence's work is a hard-headed and triumphant achievement in just such a vocation. He is renowned for his series of paintings depicting episodes in the history of African-Americans. One would think that such an endeavor—fraught, as it is, with pitfalls both artistic and political—would be impossible in a century as muddled and cynical as our own. Yet Lawrence brings to his art an impassioned stoicism that is unpretentious and ambitious. His tight-lipped humanism is perfectly realized in a terse pictorial style—flat, puzzle-like forms buttressed by a chunky geometry—which combines high modernism and a homespun primitivism. The end result is an art that confirms how uncommon the common man can be.

Lawrence's recent show at the DC Moore Gallery, titled "The Builders," consisted of twelve works centered around images of construction workers and carpenters. While the paintings were conceived of as a group, they didn't have the overriding narrative typical of Lawrence's historical series. They did, however, benefit from being in proximity to one another. Lawrence's declarative colors—dense planks of blue, black, red, and green—create a punchy correspondence, "popping" within the confines of the gallery. The best paintings were the most complex, wherein Lawrence segmented his compositions into parcels of incident by the use of a grid—literally, the I-beams upon which his workers do their job. (My favorite among these parcels was the windows that shimmy happily in the lower left portion of *Builders—Nine Windows* [1998].) It's clear that these works serve as Lawrence's meditation on his own art. While his pictorial stand-ins don't possess much personality, they go about their labor with determination and, on occasion, a smile. Of all of the artist's symbols—the bowls of fruit, the conglomerations of tools, the enlarged hands—the smile is the most telling. Only an artist as free of guile as Lawrence could pull off such a visual metaphor without being corny. "The Builders" paintings are testimony that artisanship and candor are above the dictates of fashion. Of course, Lawrence's entire career has long been proof of just that. In more ways than one, his is an art with backbone.

Inside the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Lester Johnson: The Sixties," which was at the Peter Findlay Gallery this past November, there is a photograph of the artist standing alongside Willem de Kooning. By linking Johnson with the Ab Ex master, this photo serves as a kind of stamp of approval for the former's paintings. It's a marketing strategy, but also a reminder of the difficulty painters like Johnson encountered in following on the heels of a juggernaut the size of the New York School. His paintings of parading men, brawny cousins of Magritte's bowler-hatted automatons, are emblematic of the urban rhythms that

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found their abstract correlative in the work of de Kooning and Kline. Yet Johnson's paintings, albeit influenced by the facture of Abstract Expressionism, must have seemed out of sync at the time of their creation. Today, however, with contemporaries as diverse as Nell Blaine and Bob Thompson receiving increased attention, Johnson is less a loner on the sidelines of history than another facet of a supercharged artworld.

Johnson's paintings from the early to mid-Sixties trade in an overheated hurly-burly that is too often mistaken for passion. In the late Sixties, however, Johnson harnessed his touch without forfeiting the brusque quality he admired in the work of the New York School. The anonymous men strutting across his canvases, often seen from a worm's eye view, are businesslike and brutish. Still, there is a curious disjunction between image and paint in Johnson's art similar to that found in de Kooning's *Women* series and, for that matter, Chuck Close's heads. As handsome as the paintings are, they lack an aesthetic specificity: when Johnson syncopates his hulking figures in an across-the-board pattern, he may as well be painting stripes. His best pictures abandon this all-over uniformity for a higgledy-piggledy space that is less taut compositionally but more intriguing as image-making. In both *James Joyce* (1971) and *Crowd* (1967), Johnson shuffles his figures like a deck of cards. Here his men aren't compositional motifs on which to hang paint, but imposing icons given meaning as art. *Crowd*, with its beach hunks etched in an electric line, was especially memorable —and disquieting. One writer stated that Johnson "tackled the basic agenda of post-Renaissance occidental art." Such grandiose claims are enough to scare cooler heads away, but the virile authority of *Crowd* makes us feel that such hoopla is not unwarranted.

Brice Marden must love how his drawings—fifty-two spanning over thirty years —look in the new galleries dedicated to the Whitney's permanent collection. The fifth floor galleries are, after all, stately and well-proportioned. "Brice Marden Drawings: The Whitney Museum of American Art Collection"—on view until March 28—only skims the trajectory of the artist's oeuvre, but it gives us an idea of his capabilities as a painter. If there is one thing the show makes clear, it is Marden's high regard for art. Any artist who titles a series of drawings *Homage to Art* is out to make an unambiguous statement. But *Homage to Art 9* (1973), a postcard of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* collaged atop a graphite and beeswax drawing, isn't simply unambiguous, it's painfully obsequious. Marden may love the Dutch master, but the only thing he validates in deifying Mondrian is his own good taste. Marden's esteem for art—art with a capital "A," one is tempted to add—hinders his work. As a painter, he rarely risks more than a seductive pictorial veneer. Whether it be the burnished surface of a grid from the early Sixties or the looping doodles of his recent paintings, Marden's work is easy on the eyes.

There is an old saw that painters like de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn challenged their own facility by deliberately setting out to thwart it. I suspect that when Marden draws with the branch of an ailanthus tree, he, too, feels involved in a similar endeavor. Yet as much as he tries to distance himself from his own expertise, Marden ends up embracing it. The Pollock-inspired *Bridge Study* (1991), for instance, is in some ways better than the real thing. It's a good-looking piece and one can start to hate oneself for not liking it more. But Marden supplants Pollock's rhythmic urgency with a brittle elegance. The distinction between aesthetic engagement and spoon-feeding is one that Marden can't quite navigate. He's an artist who plays to the crowd. Only in a couple of pages of *Workbook—Hydra, Tampere, N.Y.C., Bucks Co.* (1987–88) does one see his considerable gifts foiled, so to speak, for the better. But even when he should be doodling in his sketchbook, Marden acts as if he were receiving an ovation from an auditorium filled with curators.

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How much pleasure can one derive from a bounteous breakfast table? If the cup of coffee and glass of grapefruit juice in Nell Blaine's *Karalpe Table and Thistle* (1979) are any indication, the answer is quite a lot. The exhibition late last year of paintings and watercolors by Blaine (1922–1996) at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery spanned twenty-one years, from 1975 to the year of the artist's death. Her depictions of landscape, flowers, and still-lifes celebrate the here-and-now. There is in her pictures an appreciative wonder in, say, an arrangement of chairs around a dining room table or the way the pattern of a tablecloth bumps up against that of the wallpaper directly behind it. This just-around-the-corner revelation manifests itself in rich and, at times, outrageous juxtapositions of color, and in painthandling that is at once masterly and offhand. In Blaine's work, the viewer feels the paint being nudged or, rather, nudging itself across the canvas. The blobs convey a love of tangibility, both for the objects delineated and the buttery substance of her chosen medium. The easygoing virtuosity of Blaine's art is that of an artist for whom painting was a delightful challenge.

Comparisons of Blaine's paintings to those of Bonnard seem natural enough and I don't doubt that she admired his work. But where Bonnard dissolved the observed world into a shimmering evocation of memory, Blaine grasped a physical world of simple splendors. Matisse famously claimed that he wanted his art to function as a psychological armchair. It might be said of Blaine that she wanted hers to be, oh, a jar of premium marmalade. This comparison might strike some as facetious (or condescending), but the paintings here are those of an artist for whom each day was one of abundant possibility. For Blaine, looking at cars pass by from the window of a Manhattan apartment—which, I'm guessing, is where Blaine painted *Blue Sunset* (1996)—offered a splendid opportunity to explore color and light. Such affirmation in the face of the less than pleasant consequences of New York City traffic may be foolhardy environmentally, but it is winning artistically. Is there anyone who loves the art of painting who would not be wooed by the thumbprint-like splotches running diagonally across *Blue Sunset*?

Blaine's understated gift was well served by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, but it will take a full museum show to define her as an artist. That is something we should all look forward to.

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Dance

Meaningless enchainments

by Laura Jacobs

Dance is always called the ephemeral art, and it's never more ephemeral than the moment you sit down to write about it. Critics go to the theater armed with all kinds of paper. Some have those long, skinny, nifty reporters notebooks (the beat goes on), while others scratch violently on yellow legal pads (review as deposition). One critic famously deposits her descriptions in little ledgers the size of a slim cigarette case—one puff per page. I use spiral notebooks, smaller than the ones from grade school, larger than my address book. You could say the scribbling inside is a synthesis of classroom and map.

I don't like to look back at my notebooks. First of all, they're messy. The little sentences lurch and weave and drop off into nowhere—their own spastic dance. Second, they're boring; totally prosaic. Here are three lines picked at random: "4 men in dove gray and diamondite tunics" or "Ethan's new haircut" or "zombie balances." Third, looking back into the notebook means I'm at the work part of dance writing—describing the dance—because for this you need a reality check (what was done and what-you-remember-was-done can be two entirely different things). This much I've learned: when I go back into a notebook and see pages and pages describing the nooks and crannies of a dance, it means the dance never became pleasurable, never pulled off words into its own world, never got . . . beyond. It means the dance was bad.

Eidos: Telos, the work from 1995 that William Forsythe and his Ballett Frankfurt brought to BAM in early December, arrived in New York already weighted down with words. First there were the preview pieces explaining Forsythe, like this bit of heavy weather from Darrell Wilkins in *Ballet Review*: "Above all, however, it is the complacency of self-righteousness and the passivity of American consumerism that Forsythe despises and fears, and seeks to combat in his ballets. As if to chastise passivity, he employs a doggedly cerebral language that requires the active, intellectual participation of his audience. . . . Forsythe ballets affect the spirit only by virtue of a synaptic signal transmitted by the brain." (Uh-oh . . .)

Then there were the pieces placing Forsythe, like this blithe claim from the young critic at *Time Out*: "Forsythe's dances are filled with movement language and choreographic patterns every bit as thrilling and sophisticated as those created by George Balanchine." This is not the first time Forsythe has been pushed up into Balanchine's league.

Finally, there was Forsythe himself. "Last week I got Forsythe on the phone and asked him what to expect," wrote Christopher Reardon in *The Village Voice*. "He replied with a cerebral riff on clinical neurology, classical mythology, and mathematical algorithms—odd concerns for a dance rooted in grief." Opening the pro-

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gram at BAM, one faced five pages of Forsythe, i.e. tiny print deconstructing the title, reprinting the text, contemplating the idea —not once but twice—all in a literary style that moved between the portentous aphorism ("Movement is a factor of the fact that you are actually evaporating") and a mind-numbing, jargon-loving stream of consciousness: "since it was all alphabetic operations, which means there is access by proximity—in other words, positions suggest movements within an associative chain or organization, which is based on where the limbs are placed in relation to each other. Your kinesphere functions as a memory. . . ." As if this weren't enough, there was also a diagram of Forsythe's "Choreographic System," a sort of concrete poem of squares, arrows, and postmodern strategies like "Further Modifying/Analytical Operations."

And the dance hasn't even started.

Eidos: Telos translates as "The Form: The End" or "Genre: The End" and looking at those five pages one had to wonder if we were to take them straight, as helpful hints to the dance, or if they're actually a weird endgame, a flamboyant joke like the time-lapsed, acid-colored apocalypse in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, only in this case the "kinesphere" is a nihilistic maze of language. If it is a joke, it's the same joke Forsythe has been telling for years: you know, the one about classical ballet—that it's dead.

Forsythe's first hit in America was *Side 2—Love Songs* from 1979. Choreographed for the Stuttgart Ballet, reading like the flip side to the classical pas de deux, it was a series of chaotic, bashing, bruising duets set to Aretha Franklin and Dionne Warwick songs. By the mid-1980s, *Love Songs* had been picked up by ballet companies around the country. You could tell dancers loved throwing themselves into this pop-music abyss, that they felt hip and slick taking liberties with technique in the name of *verismo*. And audiences too responded to the violence. The Eighties was a time of unbuttoned aggression in the dance world, never mind that for sheer chthonic power you couldn't top Balanchine's *Four Temperaments*, a 1946 masterpiece of monstrous, yet absolutely formal, hunger. Twyla Tharp was doing appetite-aggression-apocalypse her way in her company, percolating nasty patterns and implosions like a chemist in a lab (a noxious early dance was called *Bad Smells*), and even Paul Taylor was playing on the Hellmouth, with nuclear explosions like *Last Look*.

But Forsythe was doing something different. With *Love Songs* he began his ironic relationship, his love-hate relationship, with ballet—his love of the classical vocabulary as a collection of academic status symbols he could polish or pervert; his hate of the classical syntax for its imposing, and powerfully predisposing, poetics. Rather than facing the music and coming to terms with ballet's deep and dazzling grammar (which has, it's true, swamped legions of choreographers in cliché, in endless swoons and bourrées), Forsythe tosses steps into the void. He may isolate a deadpan plié or a woozy arabesque and then repeat it endlessly, turning it into an absurd tic, a nagging scratch on the sound track. Or he may hammer state-of-the-art extensions and pirouettes into stiff phrases, each step receiving the same unrelenting pressure, the same space. It's an impacted phrase, robbed of rhythm and breath and life. Imagine a sentence in which "each" "word" "is" "in" "quotes"—there's only one way to say it. Forsythe has a partner in crime in his composer Thom Willems, who likes to lift a measure of music from some iconic ballet score (from Tchaikovsky in *Impressing the Czar*, from Stravinsky in *Eidos: Telos*) and then torture it on the rack of his synthesizer, making it groan and scream. Neither Forsythe nor Willems risks putting a coherent phrase onstage. If they did, we might see what's missing.

On ballet dancers in the best companies (this does not include Forsythe's own company, Ballett Frankfurt), thanks to the highly-calibrated and quicksilver articula-

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tion of their bodies, Forsythe's work virtually gleams. At the New York City Ballet, for instance, the dancers computerize his sharp, jarring steps, absorbing his discontinuities, his *gibberish*, in one long sinewy surge. Technique becomes technology. The audience, not surprisingly, responds with hoots and cheers, caught up in the self-congratulatory, sci-fi energy—it's the inhuman, pushbutton power of *The Terminator*.

Still, Forsythe hungers for big and intricate meanings. And so we get works like *Steptext* (1984), a semiotics exercise that implies we've never understood a dance, or *Same Old Story* (1987), which asserts that ballet has nothing left to tell us anyway, or the full-length work from 1988, *Impressing the Czar*, which is actually a malcontent's abstraction of *Sleeping Beauty*. From bits of *Beauty*, that dream of wordless classical continuity, Forsythe fashions a nightmare of slaughter, insanity, and (you guessed it) talk talk talk. Like one of those scary grad students—every campus has one—who sees corruption everywhere and we all must pay, who trots out his dissertation idea on every cheap date, Forsythe has made a career of making ballets about one thing—*Eidos: Telos*. The Form: The End. Maybe that's why they love him in Germany. He is enchanted by obliteration.

Looking in my notebook, I see that I too wrote five pages on *Eidos: Telos*, never once sensing that it was "a dance rooted in grief" (specifically, grief over the death of Forsythe's wife at age thirty-two). The work is divided into three parts, with two abstract dances floating on either side of a long, knotty, texted middle. The two "ballets" that are Parts I and III could really come under any title, for they are not distinguished by any specific steps or movements—it's just an open stage filled with bodies doing Forsythian doodles, hyperventilated exercises. Part I might be titled, after an observation in my notebook that sounds quite like a Forsythe title, "very inexact—muddled feeling." (It's actually called "Self Meant to Govern.") There are ominous trappings, however: clock faces, a metronome, and a digital clock on the cyclorama that eventually runs backwards to ground zero—"00:00"—while a violin and some trombones go berserk.

Part II—we know from the articles, the quotes, the program notes—is an evocation of Persephone's return to the underworld, but juxtaposed on top of that is the story of Arachne, the spiderwoman. The stage is webbed with wires, from which hang a video screen and other electrical stuff. A small blond woman, Dana Casperson, her naked torso emerging from a bustled skirt, wanders under the wires reciting a surrealist account of her burrowings up and down through dirt. This becomes increasingly grotesque, a banshee mad scene that has her on all fours, screaming, heaving, digging. Eventually, Spidergirl is joined by the rest of the company, who are dressed like her in bustled skirts. These are "the ranks of the dead" and the *zeitgeist* is established by a guy who whines a series of complaints, each prefaced with the realization that: "I'm fuckin' dead, man" and ending with a vicious threat, like "I'm gonna chop your head off and fuck you in the neckhole." It's that grad student again—à la Tarantino! Eventually we come to the requisite Forsythe set-piece, and the dancers began to swoop kaleidoscopically, making waves of symmetry, skirts wheeling as in the final section of Balanchine's *Vienna Waltzes*. For a moment, Forsythe has stopped with intellectual postures and is actually touching the medium. He's communicating not through gaps and absence, but through pulse and presence. And what does he show us? The same old punchline: the lockstep of Nothingness.

As I noted earlier, Ballett Frankfurt does not gleam in Forsythe's choreography. Though it's been ten years since I last saw this troupe, I was caught short by its motley look, the women with their faulty turnout and sickled feet, the men somewhat grungy, and puffed up in false bravado, not a virtuoso in the group. The fans of Forsythe write incessantly of the strength and clas-

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sicism of this company, but Forsythe should get his nose out of Derrida and start tending his tendus. First position might be a good place to start. These dancers were only a little less shabby than their compatriots who came to Lincoln Center last summer, the Hamburg Ballet. Led by John Neumeier—like Forsythe, another expatriate American—the Hamburg dancers had legs and feet like string cheese, weak and imprecise. But then, all that lunging, leaping, and weeping in the mountains of Mahler (Neumeier's obsession), all those transfigurations, not to mention cowbells, have left them all milked out with no place to go.

Both Forsythe and Neumeier are pretentious as hell—it's a prerequisite for working in Europe—but at least with Forsythe there's a theatrical intelligence. His enchainments may be meaningless, but he knows how to section and organize a work so you can later think something has happened—he juggles his empty synapses with flair. Neumeier, a modern dancer who wormed his way into ballet, makes flat dances that are all heavy plastique and thick flow, folk treacle "from the hills of Old Serbia" (as one astute friend put it), mornings on the autobahn, evenings on the Rhine. It's as if he thinks all you need to do is add toe shoes and the dance becomes classical. Yet there's no liftedness in Neumeier, no celestial sense of the vertical. And there's virtually no footwork beyond bourrées and a bit of woodcut heel-toe (Neumeier is Forsythe's fate-worse-than-death.)

Speaking of wood, Neumeier has a bad habit of planting men onstage, dumbly, like trees, or, perhaps, The Forest Primeval. There's a brutish homoeroticism in Neumeier's work that you're not sure he's aware of. In his ballets, the men never look at the women. Even in a pas de deux, eyes don't meet. In fact, in one of his Mahler ballets Neumeier made a pas de deux in which the couple dances with their backs to each other. But you should see the brio of his group dances for guys (soldiers, goatherds, whatever)—suddenly it's summer with Ted Shawn at Jacob's Pillow. The Neumeier ballet that had its New York premiere during American Ballet Theatre's fall season at City Center, *Spring and Fall*, was about as bad as a Neumeier ballet gets (my notebook: "2 guys begin section 2, bumping chests in air") and a little too reminiscent of Antony Tudor's achingly autumnal *Leaves are Fading*, also set to Dvorak, and premiered by ABT back in 1975. But then if Neumeier's got anything, it's gall. Last summer, the Hamburg Ballet brought a work called *Bernstein Dances* to the State Theater, the very stage where Jerome Robbins, Bernstein's longtime collaborator, premiered so many dances to the same Bernstein scores. I see in my notebooks I covered eight pages with description, i.e. "LB figure [Bernstein] goes backwards on back of crawling dancer —mimes piano playing." The student days?

I've sometimes lumped Twyla Tharp in with Forsythe as an artist whose energy seems to flow from a place of anger and ambivalence. She's always most herself plunk in the middle of chaos, jostled and giddy, chasing sensation with spikes on, the Ty Cobb of choreography. In the echelons of order, in Bach or Mozart, she choreographs with a furrowed brow and an empty hand—she doesn't know how to have fun, and starts tripping and goosing the status quo, like a mean jester. So yes, a bit like Forsythe, Tharp has made negative slants and sleights a point of departure. But unlike Forsythe, Tharp's work is sensual, palpable, and formal in a traditional way. She loves music (her dance to silence, *The Fugue*, is more melodious than anything Forsythe has done). She has a feeling for odd continuities and relevant pop references. And she pushes at the syntax from within its rhythms, from within its ribs.

Tharp premiered a work at ABT this fall called *Known By Heart* and it was, on first viewing, a puzzlement. The ballet is divided into three sections and the music includes two anonymous selections, plus Mozart, Donald Knaack, and Steve Reich. From section to section there is no discernible harmonic connection. The first section, a

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pas de deux for Julie Kent and Angel Corella, is delicate, airy, a flirtation in the dell set to what sounds like a march, followed by Mozart's "Danse Allemande." The second section, to Knaack's clanking, ticking, toy-piano piece "Junk Music," is a contemporary duet for Ethan Stiefel and Susan Jaffe, a sort of cyber-glam romance—a ballet in a Barneys' window, complete with high-fashion standoffs and come-ons (it's an off-and-on relationship). The third section, to Reich, is all momentum, with an avid corps dancing in twos and fours, the stage a concourse of slow motion and sudden speed. The four principals return and mix in, their earlier choreographic phrases now suspended collage-like in Reich's timeless twilight.

What kind of ballet is *Known By Heart*? You can't tell, but you don't quite care because it's pulling you along anyway, drawing you into its whims and psychodramas. One thing is clear: in Ethan Stiefel, Tharp has found a new fascination (perhaps a new Misha). ABT's strawberry-blond boy-wonder has never looked so grown up, so pure and pumped at once. Stiefel steals the show with his good-natured perfection, his stance of bafflement in the face of feminine wiles. Even more importantly, Tharp has made steps for Julie Kent that look like steps made for Julie Kent. They're sea-shell delicate—not the usual higgledy-piggledy throw-away lines Tharp gives women—and they're pure pleasure. It's a real breakthrough for Tharp, who has never been very good with ballet girls.

On second viewing, Tharp's ballet—long at forty-four minutes—seemed not longer but shorter, always a sign that something's right. The dancers were relishing their roles, and the work's construction, still strange, began to seem a metaphor for suspended judgment, aimless impulses. *Known By Heart* mixes favorite Tharp dance forms, bits and schtick she can do, has done, in her sleep and knows "by heart": the boxing jabs, the sparring lovers, the aerobic angels, the softshoe shadows, the lilt she's lifted from ballet's pastorals. It's all there, floated out and then compressed into the strata of Reich's dark, dense, endless loop of sound, with its coal-dust intonations. Tharp hasn't made a diamond. I don't think she tried to. That's the beauty. Instead she's made a dusky dance embedded with chips and sparkles, machine dreams and déjà-vu. It's a stretch of her subconscious. I hardly wrote a word.

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The media

History Potomac style

by James Bowman

Though a pity, it is wonderfully appropriate that the American journalistic culture is almost never looked into except by journalists, for narcissism is its salient characteristic. Indeed, for anyone without the journalist's penchant for self-congratulation, the whole subject is faintly disgusting. Partly this is because of the profession's parasitic nature. Journalists are revolting the way leeches or tapeworms or lawyers are revolting. But some parasites can be of benefit to their host organisms, and journalists would have to be said to fall into this category. So long as they realize that their place is with garbage collectors and sewer workers, there is no harm in them. In some parts of the world, they still do realize it. I remember once talking to a British journalist about his paper's coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial, which he expected to stand out from the pack by arguing that the verdict was entirely correct. When I expressed my astonishment, he replied: "What can I say? We're the scum of the earth."

But American journalists don't believe that. On the contrary, they believe that they are the cream of the earth, if not god-like emissaries from some supermundane Absoluteville, graciously condescending in their ineffable glibness to explain to lesser folk, engaged in their petty, earth-bound and "partisan" quarrels, how easily they might have solved all their problems if only they had had the good fortune to be born journalists. It is the smelly arrogance and smugness of this habit of mind which make the journalistic culture truly repugnant to decent people and, as I tried to argue in our last number, one reason for believing that the opinion polls' surprising suggestion that the people cannot be dissuaded from liking Bill Clinton may instead be evidence that they cannot be dissuaded from disliking the media.

We must leave it to others to decide how far the public may be justified in regarding the attack on our president and, indeed, our American system of constitutional government, as the fault of the media. Certainly the appearance of the pornographer Larry Flynt in a position of considerable prominence among those media during the last month cannot have done much to endear the journalistic profession to the people—though journalists' entirely predictable, and by now quite comic, weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth at being compelled to keep company with the likes of Mr. Flynt can be relied upon to keep intact the journalists' own obliviousness to their unpopularity. In fact, it is central to an understanding of their coverage of the Clinton scandals that they believe on the evidence of those misleading polls that they are, perhaps for the first time since the storied days of Watergate, on the same side as the public will.

In those days, so the mythology has it, the people wanted to get rid of the president they had so recently and overwhelmingly elected, and the media did all it could

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to give the people what they wanted. Now, the people are supposed to want with at least equal fervor to keep their government's chief executive firmly in his place and to punish with electoral annihilation any Republican foolhardy enough to vote for impeachment—or, impeachment having been inexplicably voted for, for conviction. Once again, as it did a quarter century ago, the people's faithful servants in the media are prepared to rise to the occasion and help give them what they want. Thus the fabled White House "spin machine" has scarcely needed to turn itself on in order to set the press a-spinning its way, crying out against "the politics of personal destruction" (strange that these voices were not heard when the object of such destruction was Newt Gingrich or Clarence Thomas or John Tower or Robert Bork) and in favor of "bipartisanship."

Among many amusing manifestations of this new excuse for media smugness, I rank the outpouring of adulation for the Senate's 100-0 vote on the rules for the impeachment trial near the top for entertainment value.

> John Warner took triumphant strides as he raced through the Capitol basement [wrote Joel Achenbach in *The Washington Post*]. The bipartisan caucus yesterday had been, for the institution of the Senate, not just a success but an affirmation, a sudden and dramatic example of what every senator had been proclaiming for days—that the Senate is different, that it's unique, that it's not (and this would be merely hinted) like that gaggle of partisans and ideologues over on the House side of the Capitol.

On the other side of a photograph of Senators Edward Kennedy and Phil Gramm shaking hands, Helen Dewar and Peter Baker wrote their own version of the story:

> A unanimous Senate embraced a compromise plan yesterday to begin hearing the case against President Clinton next week, postponing the critical decision on whether to call witnesses in a bid to avoid "the black pit" of partisanship that had threatened to paralyze the impeachment trial.

The New York Times also featured the "two ideological opposites," Kennedy and Gramm, on its front page, where Alison Mitchell wrote that "The agreement averted further confrontation over rival Republican and Democratic trial plans that had threatened to send the Senate into the same partisan spiral as the House," and Adam Clymer grimly noted that the proceedings were on "The High Road for Now." Clymer said that the agreement was a defeat for both the Republican House managers who were bringing the case before the Senate and for the White House:

> Each of them would have been pleased if the Republicans had used their majority to jam through, on a vote of 55 to 45, procedures and schedules that would have allowed prosecutors from the House to range far beyond the evidence presented last month in their chamber and to call witness after witness.
>
> The House managers would have liked the freedom that would have given them.
>
> The White House would have preferred no possibility of witnesses. But if it had to risk Ms. Lewinsky's testimony, it would have liked to face it after a vote it could portray as the will of a Republican Party consumed by partisan hatred.

Francis X. Clines on an inside page echoed Mr. Achenbach's words in writing:

> Down the corridors the lawmakers fairly danced, their mood approaching giddiness, as the Senate rallied today around its own need for dignity. Having sought sanctuary from the maddening politics of impeachment in a hallowed gaslight-era chamber of the Capitol, the senators emerged three hours later exulting in the rarest of news: The clash of President Clinton and his House Republican accusers was far from settled, but at least the nation would be treated to a moment of bipartisan

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> unanimity—an armistice day of sorts—in the yearlong battering from scandal.

Not surprisingly, senators who wanted to be quoted striking statesmanlike poses, knew what to say:

> "If we went to the rancor of the House, we'd have totally failed," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont. "I think most of us, Republicans and Democrats, know the House failed miserably." . . .
>
> "What we are interested in is dignity in the Senate," Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama, said as he and his colleagues broke from their meeting and headed for the vote in high hope. "We are not interested in a pornographic movie," he added, delighted that the Senate's opening image offered no repetition of the House's caravan delivery of boxes of salacious evidence. . . .
>
> Across a corridor milling with senators upbeat in their fellowship, Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, gave a cautious readout of the agreement but concluded "There is a genuine feeling—at this point in time, at least, on each side—that the Senate loses and the country loses by a partisan donnybrook."

And when Representative Bob Barr, one of the Republican House managers, was quoted as grumbling that the senators hadn't the "backbone" to "take on tough issues," Clines took it upon himself to answer for them: "But senators seemed unanimous in the positive pleasure of letting House, White House, and nation know that today, at least, they had the backbone to go on record against partisanship in deciding the fate of the President."

Well, at least for a few days they did. For the 100-0 vote was achieved only by deferring a decision on the most controversial matter, which was whether or not the House managers would be allowed to call witnesses in bringing their case before the Senate. No matter. Its significance lay not in its permanence as a procedural breakthrough but in its confirmation of what the media had been hammering at with relentless insistence for months, that the whole proceedings could be laid to the charge of dat ol' debbil, partisanship. The Senate could have passed a unanimous motion that the sky was blue and accomplished the same end, which was to affirm that the media were right to keep insisting that what above all the American people want from their elected representatives is bland consensus.

Although it is certainly true that bland consensus works in favor of the White House, since a great deal of partisan energy is necessary in order to overcome the inertia of the status quo, it does not necessarily follow that the media craves consensus because it wants to do the White House a good turn. Equally, Adam Clymer is not entirely wrong to say that, if not actually disappointed at this turn of events, the White House has something to lose as well as to gain from it. Journalists are not completely stupid, and their resentment of Clinton's obvious duplicity may even be leavened by traces of a sharper, more manly resentment, at themselves having been made dupes of for so many years by that famous "spin machine." Yet they can scarcely forbear to act in the president's interests, in crying up bipartisanship as in so much else, because the journalistic culture is essentially the same as that of the Clintonite spinners. Indeed, as the attempts at bipartisanship by the new Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, reveal, it is essentially the same as the dominant culture of the law and government.

It is not especially original—indeed, it is rather a bore—to note that not only the president but most of his staff and most of the Congress and most of the media belong to the famous "baby boomers," born between 1946 and 1964, who have done so much to stamp the American national character with their peculiar habits of mind and (as they themselves invariably call them) "values." It is even becoming rather a commonplace to observe that the struggle over Clinton's impeachment is a distant echo of the struggles of the 1960s. As Wil-

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liam Schneider wrote in *National Journal*, "Clinton is a hero to liberals because of his values. They're the values of the Sixties. Tolerance of alternative life styles. . . . A 'modern' marriage. And empathy, the quality that got him elected." On the other side, those who hate Clinton do so "because they hate the Sixties, which they believe corrupted American culture with an ethic of self-indulgence."

About this diagnosis there has developed a real bipartisanship. In *The Washington Times*, Wes Pruden spotted the remarkably, even insistently unquestioning, enthusiasm for a Commander-in-Chief who displays his pique by bombing third world civilians among a number of people whose first political acts, like the president's, were protests against the war in Vietnam. "Now that they're getting a little too long in the tooth to make love, a lot of the old '60s liberals want to make war," he wrote. The next day, on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, Frank Rich acknowledged, "Yes, we're replaying the tragic late 60's as farce —so far."

> The right-wing rage once aimed at long-haired, draft-dodging, sexually wanton hippies . . . is now aimed at Bill Clinton, whose opportunistic, split-the-difference politics is actually closer to the old mainstream G.O.P. than to the 60's left but who nonetheless has become the right's piñata for all it hates about the Vietnam era's social and sexual revolutions.

In a lighter vein, Mike Littwin wrote a piece on "William Jefferson Airplane" in *Capital Style*.

> The great American nation entrusted one of us, boomero Uno, with the keys to the White House, and what happened is just what everyone—Nixon, Archie Bunker, Esther Thomas at my local draft board—warned us would happen. . . . No, what we have before us is, God willing, the last great battleground of the '60s . . . starring Bill Clinton as every long-haired pinko kid who ever marched anywhere near the still-unlevitated Pentagon.

In a "Style" section piece in *The Washington Post*, Michael Powell rounded up a collection of similar views:

> "The effort to exorcise the demons of the 1960s has been going on for 30 years," says Jackson Lears, a professor of history at Rutgers University. "The impeachment is the latest act of the psychodrama." "This cultural war is very much a boomer phenomenon," adds Neil Howe, who studies generational history. . . . "We've long held that we are holders of vision and values. So it's not surprising that we cast impeachment as about the soul and character of our leader."

Yet one thing that all these theorists of political "rage" and "war" seem to have failed to notice is that the most strikingly Sixtiesish thing about it is precisely such apocalyptic language applied to trivialities. Journalistic self-importance, like Clinton's, owes a lot to the self-importance of the war protestors and self-proclaimed "revolutionaries" who believe to this day that their own war against "the Establishment" was what changed the course of history with respect not only to Vietnam but also to race relations, women's and gay rights, and other matters that mark our post-1960s world as a period of enlightenment, compared with what went before. It is that same self-importance we are seeing again—though among journalists it has never really gone away—in response to the Clinton scandals.

Of course, if history doesn't supply you with a real war, you have to do the best you can with what it does supply, which in this case is a minor sex scandal and a few unmanned missiles hurled at a far away country of which we know nothing. Nevertheless, to journalistic commentators, impeachment, war, and doubtfulness about the connection between the two were all historic: "Not since Harry S Truman and the Korean War," wrote R. W. Apple ponderously in *The New York Times*, "has a President been subjected to quite the same questioning of motive that Mr. Clinton was subjected to today"—when, that is, some

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Republicans dared to suggest that he might have found it convenient to bomb Iraq at that particular moment because there was to have been a vote on impeachment the next day. But for most journalists, the problem was that history generally refused to look like itself. As the subhead to a story by David Broder and Dan Balz had it in *The Washington Post*: "On a Day of Historic Import, Washington Does Its Business in an Eerie Quietude."

If Washington was quiet, *The Washington Post* was going to do what it could to make up for it. On another page of the same day's paper, Guy Gugliotta wrote that

> It was like throwing gasoline on a fire. The impeachment of President Clinton had already turned the House into the partisan equivalent of an armed camp, but when the bombing of Iraq began, tempers exploded. Republican House members, virtually certain they had the votes to impeach President Clinton on at least one and possibly two counts of perjury, trooped to the Capitol's basement catacombs at dusk to hear from their leaders why they should postpone—why they would have to postpone—the impeachment debate. An hour later the Democrats held their own meeting. Their plan was to remind the Republicans and the public during today's scheduled impeachment debate—later postponed until Friday at the earliest—that the GOP had refused to countenance a censure proposal, when censure was the nation's preferred option. . . . The atmosphere was murderous everywhere.

Yet the most incendiary quotation Gugliotta could come up with was from Representative Gerald Solomon who said, "Never underestimate a desperate president. . . . What option is left for getting impeachment off the front page and maybe even postponed? . . . We should not be handling the impeachment while he is bombing Iraq and that's exactly the reason he's doing it."

This is murderous?

In *The New York Times*, Mr. Apple quickly turned aside from the question of the president's credibility to that favorite theme of the journalistic class, "civility"—

> On a day of truly explosive drama in this politically punch-drunk capital, two of the long-running conflicts of these final years of the old millennium collided with a bang: the Western allies' struggle to contain and disarm the resilient President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Mr. Clinton's struggle to govern effectively in the face of the assaults of his political foes.

Thus, when Trent Lott "went so far as to question publicly Mr. Clinton's motives (for which questioning he later apologized)," it became possible to say that

> This was the climax, in a way, of years of deterioration in this city's political civility. The habit of refusing to give one's adversaries the benefit of the doubt, of viewing them as enemies rather than opponents, increasingly ingrained in the Congressional culture has now seized a beachhead in foreign policy debate.

And off we went once more on the evils of "partisanship." Thus, too, Dan Balz led off his piece in the *Post* by saying that

> A decade of destructive partisanship, personal attack and win-at-all-cost politics has crystallized in Washington this week, and the question no one can begin to answer is where it will end.
>
> The extraordinary events of the past 48 hours suggest that the simple civilities that once helped to lubricate the rough game of politics are being swept away. . . .
>
> "Last week, this city reminded people of Beirut in the 1980s," said Kenneth Duberstein, former chief of staff in the Reagan administration. "It now reminds people of the napalm-bombed Vietnam: total scorched earth. It is very sad for this place." This descent into the swamps of conflict, suspicion and raw partisanship has been coming for years. As a former official in the administration put it late yesterday, "If you rip away the

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> civility from our politics, the country and our institutions pay a terrible price."

Odd then that nobody in the country at large seemed to notice, or to care very much if they did notice, all this bombing and napalming in Washington—or, for that matter, Baghdad. It might be argued that it is a curious kind of napalm bombing that people can choose to ignore. But there's the cleverness of Balz's thesis, for this very indifference to the carnage is itself taken to be evidence of its effects, and the price we pay (without knowing it) for partisanship:

> That price is the growing disillusionment by the public toward political life in Washington and a coarsening of the system designed to resolve differences peacefully and honorably. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, there appears to be no incentive to playing the game any other way.

Or, as *The Wall Street Journal* put it: "Breakdown of Trust Threatens Orderly Government." Or maybe not. At times the difference between the portentous language and the reality in front of them, could hardly go without being remarked upon by the journalists themselves. As Caryn James wrote in *The New York Times*,

> At every crucial turn in the impeachment process, the analysts have proclaimed that this time—the start of the House Judiciary Committee hearings, the House impeachment vote, the start of the trial—it truly was historic. But yesterday, it seemed that the commentators were failing to look at the pictures their networks were sending out, as they ignored the gulf between the day's huge historical import and its minimal emotional impact. . . .
>
> Though the drumbeat of "History!" continued ("We are here today to see something that no American has ever seen before," Peter Jennings said as he began ABC's coverage), there was a new undercurrent; commentators acknowledged they were echoing themselves. In his folksy tone, Dan Rather offered a preemptive explanation, saying on CBS, "You say, well, come on, Dan, you keep saying it's historic. There's no other word that describes it."

Rather sounds as if he is trying to convince himself as well as the diminished number of millions who still watch him. Likewise, when *The Washington Post* bannered the impeachment vote, the headlines underneath included: "Yesterday Was Not a Chapter in a Washington Novel: It Was the Unplotted, Unscripted, Head-Spinning Real Thing" and "Reality Meets Rhetoric on an Unpredictable Course for Nation." Wow! Reality!

Heavy.

There speaks the journalistic culture, aware at some level that most of what it spends its time getting excited about is not real at all but unable because of the nature of the job (if the audience didn't think it was real, presumably they wouldn't watch, or read) and because of their own self-importance to acknowledge the fact, except on rare occasions where something real does happen. That this is also the language of Bill Clinton and the people around him is suggested by the fact that he is reported to be looking towards this same "history" for justification. As Peter Baker wrote in *The Washington Post*, "for a White House that has made a fine art out of spinning the latest news cycle, the challenge now is figuring out a way to spin history." How like Clinton! And how like the press to report such news in all seriousness. Perhaps emboldened by the 400 historians assembled by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to proclaim that the president should not be impeached, they have the colossal conceit of the Sixties generation that history is on their side. They should take warning from their own attitude toward the increasingly alien (racist! sexist! homophobic!) pre-Sixties past and realize that history never stays spun.

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Books

A sad & angry summa

by Eric Ormsby

Triumph demands a procession and in Geoffrey Hill's new collection—in reality, a single long poem in 150 sections—a throng of notables from all epochs ambles in jostling simultaneity past our gaze.[1] Not surprisingly, poets predominate, especially Petrarch who invented and perfected the genre (in his *Trionfi* of around 1340), but painters, composers, and historical personages also step into position in Hill's dense stanzas. Twice in the poem Hill invokes Oskar Kokoschka's 1936 portrait of Thomas Masaryk (now in the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh), itself emblematic of historical asynchronism: Masaryk's outsized countenance floats, against the backdrop of the Prague Castle and Charles Bridge, alongside that of the seventeenth-century polymath Jan Amos Komensky, or Comenius, also magnified (in his 1996 collection *Canaan,* Hill has already celebrated "huge-fisted, visionary Comenius"), while to the left of both, dramatically miniaturized, the fifteenth-century Jan Hus endures immolation within an acetylene corolla of martyr's flame. The Kokoschka portrait abolishes historical chronology, and Hill too aspires to such atemporal immediacy. "All things are eternally present in time and nature," he proclaims in the poem's climactic section.

The Triumph of Love is unusually capacious in its historical and spatial scope. (Hill's poetic atlas, refreshingly, takes in and assumes Central and Eastern, as well as Western, Europe.) Even to list all of the names, famous and infamous, Hill inventories in this ambitious work would consume a review. The poem strides beneath the conflicting auspices of two diametrically opposed tutelary spirits: the buffoonish and swilling Trimalchio, from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, and the seventeenth-century German mystical poet and Counter Reformation agitator Johann Scheffler, whose *nom de plume* was Angelus Silesius. The device permits Hill not only to play one opposite against another on both the conceptual and verbal levels, but also to adopt a wide range of tones, from the savagely stately (his more characteristic voice) to the petulant and even squalid—new and rather surprising timbres in his register.

Hill is also much concerned with praise and blame, or *laus* and *vituperatio* as he loftily terms them. Little escapes his scorn, whether it be journalism or the entertainment industry or high finance or the unworthy among his poetic rivals or, most laceratingly, himself. For all his curmudgeonly wrath, however, Hill remains better at praise than blame, even if his tributes and accolades—they range from figures as disparate as Petrarch, Leopardi, and Montale (to cite only the Italians), to the German opponents of National Socialism, including Carlo Mierendorff and the conspirators against Hitler, to medieval

1 *The Triumph of Love*, by Geoffrey Hill; Houghton Mifflin, 84 pages, $22.

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English mystics and theologians, such as the *Doctor Profundus* Thomas Bradwardine—threaten more than once to overwhelm the wiry but delicate lyric voice that gives the book its unifying grace.

The Triumph of Love, in accord with its double aegis, is at once grandly ambitious and wincingly abject, and Hill's admirers may recoil from certain passages. He knows his propensity to grandiosity and mortifies himself without mercy. His self-scourging does not stop at an exposure of his own personal resentments, follies, and fumblings, but extends even to his aging body. He is *senex sapiens*, the knowing old man, but also a stock figure in Roman comedy. Thus, section 31 (in its entirety) reads:

> Scab-picking old scab: why should we be
> salted
> with the scurf of his sores?

Elsewhere, this figure is depicted as a "rancorous, narcissistic old sod," a grotesque individual much given to obsession, to fidgeting for words, to louche and ineffectual puns (too lame, indeed, even to cite). In a poet of such classical aplomb this proves startling. And yet, Hill has always drawn on his own foibles, as readers of *Mercian Hymns*, his masterwork, will remember. The difference in *The Triumph of Love* lies in an unexpected rawness of tone coupled with a sporadic attempt on Hill's part to incorporate American accents into his repertoire.

Perhaps this effort, fortunately infrequent, is the ineluctable consequence of Hill's by now decade-long residence in the United States. I for one do not find Hill's occasional American voice authentic, even if it is intimately allied with his quest for what he calls "a noble vernacular." But in section 125, Hill writes:

> Then there is this
> Augustinian-Pascalian thing about seeking
> that which is already found.

This is probably meant as parody, perhaps of his Boston University students' chatter, but that it is not entirely satirical the tone of the entire section makes all too plain. There are a few other such false notes sprinkled throughout the poem, such as this cant:

> African new-old
> holocaust suffers up against
> the all-time Hebrew *shoah*.

Because he has no instinctual feel for American colloquial inflections, Hill leaves the reader puzzled as to his object in including such asinine parlor-games of victimhood. Indeed, beyond a purely English register, Hill generally finds himself, unarmed, in what he has elsewhere termed "the enemy's country."

Even from these cursory remarks it will be clear that *The Triumph of Love* is not beach-reading. Geoffrey Hill is a *poeta doctus* in the grand tradition of Callimachus, Petrarch, Milton, and Eliot. His learning is as much the stuff of his poetry as is raw feeling. That both polished erudition and rasping emotion wrangle for supremacy in these pages gives the verse at its best tremendous force. Hill intertwines his long sequence with *canzoni* that represent his accolade not only to Dante and Petrarch but also, by a subtle slant of voice, to T. S. Eliot. In section 55 he begins,

> *Vergine bella*—it is here I require
> a canzone of some substance. There are sound
> precedents for this, of a plain eloquence
> which would be perfect. But—
> ought one to say, I am required; or, it is
> required of me; or, it is requisite that I should
> make such an offering, bring in such a tribute?

After such Prufrockian vacillations, he makes the *canzone* his own by evoking a statue of the Virgin disfigured by a wartime bomb:

> Nor is language now, what it once was
> even in—wait a tick—nineteen hundred and
> forty-
> five of the common era, when your blast-
> scarred face
> appeared staring, seemingly in disbelief,

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shocked beyond recollection, unable to
recognize
the mighty and the tender salutations
that slowly, with innumerable false starts,
the ages
had put together for your glory
in words and in the harmonies of stones.

Without mentioning Eliot directly, Hill comes to terms with him in these *canzoni*, the most impressive sections of the entire work. How to write credibly in the Anglo-Catholic tradition with the immense shadow, and shade, of Eliot looming immovably over his shoulder must have represented a considerable obstacle for Hill, both on the technical and on the conceptual —or even doctrinal—plane. He accomplishes this by the invention of a voice that echoes Eliot lightly while managing to falter so expertly as to interrupt the echo just as it undulates outward. Even Eliot's own uncertainties are too certain for Hill and so he stammers, or (since it is hard to imagine Hill impeded in any way having to do with words) feints a stammer, as a kind of prosodic courtesy.

Hill's erudition may disguise from the casual reader that this is an unusually personal poem, rooted—as so often with this poet—in childhood. The poem begins with observation of a natural phenomenon: "Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp." And it ends, eighty-one pages later, with the same line, slightly but definitively revised: "Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp." This epanalepsis—or, as Hill says in section 10, "the same word first and last"—is the same device Joyce used to unify *Finnegans Wake* (and is one of several ways in which Hill pays tribute to Joyce in the poem). Between "a" and "the" the entire triumph of Hill's poem unfurls, and not solely to thunderous drums and preening cornets but to lesser, harsher, more squirmy voluntaries. But while these circular lines evoke some instant of perception in Hill's wartime childhood—he was born, in 1932, in Bromsgrove, southwest of Romsley—they also echo Petrarch who wrote, in Lord Morley's 1553 translation of the "Tryumphes" (the dust jacket of Hill's book reproduces the title page of this rare edition):

And there on the grene, as I reposed fast,
Sodenly me thought, as I myne eyes up cast,
I sawe afore me a marvelous great lighte. . . .

A "rain-scarp" denotes the steep, wall-like aspect of a downpour lit up by the sun, as it might appear to a child, but the word "scarp" has military and heraldic overtones too. It is one of those dense, polysemous vocables Hill has always loved and used in his verse; immediacy combined with covert, if not secret, allusion has fortified Hill's work from the outset. For all his erudition and unabashed pleasure in other languages (he quotes here from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, German, Dutch, and Hebrew), Hill is preeminently what the Germans call an *Erlebnisdichter* (somehow only a German compound seems sumptuous enough for Hill), that is, a poet who draws mercilessly upon his own lived experience. Hill's learning, after all, is not what makes him an extraordinary poet (in my view, he is the finest poet now writing in the English language); rather, his stubborn loyalty to the phenomenal in its historic, human depth and its rendition in just and melodious measure lifts him above all his contemporaries. By loyalty to the phenomenal I mean the patterning of objects and events within commemorated time and cherished place:

Widely established yet with particular
local intensities, the snow
half-thawed now hardens over again,
glassen-ridged, or pashed
like fish-ice: refracted light
red against copper. The hedged sun
draws into itself for its self-quenching.

The Triumph of Love contains several such compact, evocative lyrics in which natural phenomena are captured in such a way as to suggest the numinous without betraying of the original object, a sort of lyrical transubstantiation, as in this section on the wind:

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On chance occasions—
and others have observed this—you can see
the wind
as it moves, barely a separate thing,
the inner wall, the cell of an hourglass,
humming
vortices, bright particles in dissolution,
a roiling plug of sand picked up
as a small dancing funnel. It is how
the purest apprehension might appear
to take corporeal shape.

The Triumph of Love is a poem of enormous, even overweening, ambition. Hill, who proudly professes his allegiance to the medieval Scholastics, has here attempted his *summa*. The work encompasses a veritable polyphony of individual voices: the poet himself, an intrusively nudging editor, a grouchy, self-loathing "old fart," a Nazi officer, a suavely Dantean worshipper, a crass punster, a strict schoolmaster, a dogma-tormented theologian. In addition, a jangling welter of themes, ranging from human brutality, especially as embodied in the Holocaust, to pettier injustices, such as the awarding of the Nobel Prize to unworthy poets (identified only as "N. and N." —fill in the blanks), to matters of chess and canon law, Canary Wharf, Chickamauga, choreography, and even Dutch liverwurst. The poem is a swarming omnium-gatherum of all (one hopes it is all) of Hill's major and minor preoccupations for the past several decades. At moments, unfortunately, there is something tiresomely Poundian about Hill's enterprise, as though every chink of every stanza had to be morticed with yet another daub of learned spackle. And yet, Hill's old ferocity, which together with his magnificence of language has always distinguished him so decisively from his rivals, is still much in evidence.

Towards the close of *The Triumph of Love*, Hill terms poetry itself, four times in chimed succession, "a sad and angry consolation." And it is true that sadness and anger are more prominent throughout than joy or reconciliation or even love itself. Given Hill's tacit subject matter—what he names "unselfbeing"—how could it be otherwise? The love Hill celebrates is a hard, baffled, stubborn, and searching love. Amid yet another busy flurry of illustrious names, Hill notes "the hatred that is in the nature of love." This ancient paradox (*odi et amo . . .*) is meant, I suspect, to afford some reconciliation of the extremes that govern the poem, as though they might coincide, somehow, along Hill's cortege of words. I am not sure that I find this persuasive. Hill is most superb at what he characteristically terms *Trauermusik*, "funeral music." His gaze is not circular, like his master Bradwardine's, but rooted in the past, and it is there that he is strongest, as in section 77:

I know places where grief has stood mute-
howling for half a century, self
grafted to unself till it is something like
these now-familiar alien hatreds,
coarse efflorescence over the dead
proprieties; strong words of Christian hope,
sub rosa, the unmentionable graffiti.

No living poet, certainly not "worthless N. and N., now Swedish millionaires" (I take the coyness of the initials to be Hill's way of reserving space for future unworthy winners), can match Geoffrey Hill at his best, in such "humming vortices." To have been granted the privilege—one wants almost to say, in Hill's own terms, accorded the grace—of writing *Mercian Hymns* or *Tenebrae*, or even the present poem, cranky and audacious as it is, makes any number of Nobel Prizes appear trivial by comparison.

Commonsense aesthete

Matthew Sturgis Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography. The Overlook Press, 405 pages, $29.95
reviewed by Brooke Allen

It is startling to realize that if Aubrey Beardsley had been fortunate enough to live out his biblical three score years and ten, he

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would have survived well into the Second World War. What might not he, the contemporary of Matisse, Picasso, Picabia, Marinetti, and Braque, have achieved? But Beardsley came of age, flourished, and died in the 1890s, and thus it is with the Nineties—the "mauve decade"—that he will forever be associated. In his *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography*, the British writer and critic Matthew Sturgis has presented a detailed, generously illustrated, and frequently amusing account of the artist's brief (a mere twenty-five years) and rather fantastic life.

A conscious dandy, Beardsley liked to pose as a man of leisure, and he cultivated a front of conspicuous idleness. Nothing could have been further from the real story, for the career of this poster boy for the decadent movement was in fact a shining testament to the virtues of hard work and strong family values.

Born August 21, 1872, Aubrey was the second child of Vincent Beardsley, a clerk in a London brewery, and the more genteel Ellen Pitt Beardsley, daughter of a Brighton surgeon. Vincent was at best a shadowy presence in the lives of Aubrey and his older sister, Mabel; it was the dynamic Ellen who filled their horizon and nurtured their artistic ambitions, launching them into "the great ocean of culture: the piano lessons, the evening programme of suitable pieces, the directed reading, the drawing and copying."

In 1884 Vincent lost his job, and Mabel and Aubrey were sent temporarily to live in Brighton with their great-aunt, Sarah Pitt. The sickly Aubrey, who had been diagnosed with early symptoms of tuberculosis at the age of seven, flourished in the sea air, and Sarah Pitt proposed that he stay in Brighton and attend the excellent Brighton Grammar School at her expense.

This was a pleasant place, where every sort of extracurricular interest was encouraged, and unlike many schools it tolerated and even enjoyed eccentricity—fortunately, for at the age of thirteen the preternaturally sophisticated Aubrey was already noticeable. A mediocre student, inattentive and dreamy in class, he managed nevertheless to become renowned in the school as an intellectual and as someone in possession of the most recherché knowledge: "Even among the conventional canon of boyhood literature," Sturgis remarks, "he had an instinct for the outré." Beardsley had always enjoyed drawing; now, at school, he became a sought-after caricaturist and illustrator. His purpose seems purely to have been that of entertaining his friends, and he produced little or no "serious" work at this time.

When he turned sixteen, however, it was time for him to earn his living and help support his family. He moved to London and obtained the depressing position of clerk in a district surveyor's office, spending whatever spare money he could scrape together on books, music, and the theater. But Beardsley's bad lungs suffered from the regime, and in 1889 he had to leave his job and take to his bed for several months. He turned this enforced rest to profit, however, by plunging into the hitherto unknown world of French literature: Daudet, Dumas, Zola, and above all Balzac, whose *Comédie humaine* he read in its entirety, inspired by the author's frank presentation of life, and more particularly of sex.

He also wrote a story of his own, which to his astonishment was accepted for publication in the mainstream magazine *Tit-Bits*. A world of possibilities now opened to him: people were actually willing to pay for his work! Beardsley's career as a writer stopped nearly as soon as it had begun, but the idea that his creative efforts might earn him a living had taken irresistible hold. From then on, although he had for the time being to continue in clerical drudgery, he began to educate himself seriously in art and literature.

It was an interesting and in many ways explosive period for British art. There was the "old" school, followers of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, led by the still-active William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Then there was the "new" school which looked

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for inspiration to Whistler and to France, and for which Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890), Oscar Wilde's *Intentions* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and George Moore's *Impressions and Opinions* (1891) were noisy advertisements. Beardsley initially embraced both movements, and considered Burne-Jones to be the greatest living painter.

Beardsley ventured to show his own work to his hero, whose reaction was everything the young man could have hoped for, and more: "Nature has given you every gift to become a great artist. I *seldom* or *never* advise anyone to take up art as a profession, but in *your* case I *can do nothing else*." Burne-Jones directed him to the Westminster School of Art, and Beardsley undertook a crushing schedule: two hours of class every evening after a full day at the office.

Soon he began to be noticed, not just for his gifts but for his character. Dandified, affected, as elongated and grotesquely stylized as one of his own caricatures, he drew attention. Up-and-coming art critics sought him out, and these new contacts led to his first commission, that of illustrating J. M. Dent's edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* in mock-medieval style. The money he would receive for this plum job emboldened him to resign from his office job: permanently, as it turned out, for Beardsley was quickly signed on by two new art journals, *The Studio*, edited by Gleeson White, and Lewis Hind's avant-garde *Pall Mall Budget*. One of the *Budget*'s employees recalled Beardsley's first appearance at their offices. "Sauntering or lounging from one part of the room to another, he looked intently at various uninteresting objects, humming and hahing half inaudibly to himself in the manner of one accustomed to be looked on as a kind of curiosity, and somewhat sensitive on the subject."

In 1893 Oscar Wilde's scandalous *Salome* was to be published in England, and Hind asked Beardsley to produce an illustration of it for the magazine. The artist obliged in a spectacular fashion, going directly to the climax of the piece with a picture of Salome kissing the severed head of John the Baptist full on the lips. He had gone too far for Hind, who "nearly had a fit," and declined to publish the offending drawing; Gleeson White saw his chance and nabbed it for *The Studio*. Thus began the uncomfortable and ill-fated friendship between the middle-aged and self-indulgent Wilde and the watchful, judgmental younger man, who was always, as Wilde was well aware, "not so much a disciple as a rival." The relationship started propitiously enough, though: Wilde loved the picture and told Beardsley that he was "the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance."

At Wilde's behest *Salome*'s publisher, John Lane, commissioned Beardsley to produce ten full-page illustrations for the play. The job made him famous. The young man, just twenty-one, found himself if not rich then at least momentarily comfortable, and he took a lease on a house in Pimlico: for the first time in twenty years, Aubrey, Mabel and their parents had a home of their own.

Beardsley continued to refine his dandified pose, affecting, for example, to be able to work only by candlelight, so that those who stopped by to visit at high noon would find his curtains closed tight and candles ablaze. His friends, though, recognized the real person behind the mask: his close companion Max Beerbohm, exactly his age and recently down from Oxford, remarked on his common sense and "inborn kindliness." But Beardsley's caricatures could be vicious, and he seemed to take special pleasure in tormenting the hapless Wilde, as, for example, with a drawing entitled "Oscar Wilde at Work," showing the playwright as "corpulent and complacent, sitting at his desk surrounded by his study-aids: the works of Swinburne and Gautier, Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, a 'Family Bible' and —most importantly—a French dictionary and a volume entitled 'French Verbs at a Glance.'"

Beardsley and his friends had long had thoughts of putting together a magazine in

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which art and literature could appear together but unconnected to one another, a protest against the "story picture" in art and "sloppy sentimentalism and happy endings" in literature. Thus was born *The Yellow Book*, an idea which Beardsley proposed to the publisher John Lane. Lane fell for it, taking on Beardsley as art editor and Henry Harland as literary editor. Artists as different as the iconoclastic young Max Beerbohm and the elderly President of the Royal Academy, Sir Frederick Leighton, were recruited; Oscar Wilde, however, was deliberately left out, possibly because Beardsley feared that Wilde's powerful personality would come to dominate "his" venture.

The first volume of *The Yellow Book* appeared in April 1894, and the critical reception, "though not generally favorable, was gratifyingly loud." *The Times*, for instance, castigated it as a "combination of English rowdiness with French lubricity." It was unwholesome, scandalous; Beardsley himself was widely assumed to be the same. *The Yellow Book*'s readers could not miss the whiff of sex in each and every one of Beardsley's drawings, sex that to many seemed perverse, allied as it often was with ugliness rather than with conventional beauty.

Beardsley's work dominated the first (most would also say the best) four issues; then disaster struck, in the form of Oscar Wilde's arrest. Beardsley and Wilde were so closely allied in the public's mind that the younger man was instantly tarred with the same brush as the older. Beardsley was always considered by his friends to be a heterosexual, or, perhaps more correctly, asexual, for he seems not to have had a significant sexual relationship at any time during his short life. Nevertheless, he was drawn toward the homosexual milieu, and many of his closest friends were openly homosexual, insofar as it was possible to be open at that time.

The backlash in the wake of the Wilde affair was intense, and Beardsley was its victim: *The Yellow Book*'s publishers were constrained to dismiss him from the magazine. The spirited Beardsley, in ill health and with no means of support, fought the philistine advance defiantly. He launched into other projects, including illustrations for *Lysistrata*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Way of the World*. He also accepted a pension in exchange for regular work from one Leonard Smithers, who could be described, depending on your outlook, as either a courageous publisher or a high-class pornographer, the Maurice Girodias of his day.

In May of 1896 Beardsley's health broke down, this time for good. Realizing that he was dying, he took a step he had long contemplated and was received into the Roman Catholic Church. He then made his way to the Riviera, resigned to giving up the city life he loved. (During an earlier illness, banished to the country, he had been irritated at hearing a friend cheeringly refer to "Dame Nature"; "Damn Nature," he snapped.)

In Dieppe he was still strong enough to hold court with a little of his old flair: an acquaintance recalled his tossing out anecdotes and reflections "like a prince throwing down golden ducats." But by the time he reached the invalid resort of Menton he had rejected art and taken refuge in faith alone. In this new state of mind he wrote to Smithers, urging him to destroy "*all* copies of *Lysistrata* and bad drawings." Of course the canny publisher did no such thing; still, he wrote to the penitent telling him that he had, therefore allowing Beardsley to die in peace on March 16, 1898. Mabel, "her dramatic sensibilities unimpaired, laid Aubrey's copy of *La dame aux camélias* inside the coffin."

Aubrey Beardsley's career had been brief, and not always very appetizing to the public; the waters soon closed over his head. His obituaries were grudging in England, more enthusiastic in France. Gleeson White deemed him to have influenced the nascent Art Nouveau movement; he was generally considered, also, to have influenced Diaghilev and Bakst. Soon, though, he was practically forgotten.

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It was not until the 1960s that the Beardsley revival—a revival still in progress—began. A major exhibition at the Victoria and Albert brought him to the attention of a generation peculiarly receptive to his powerful, oddly "psychedelic" decorative line, his subversive humor, and his happy flirtation with obscenity. Beardsley—at least the pre-conversion Beardsley—would have been infinitely gratified that his work was still capable of shocking more than sixty years after his death, and pleased to know at the time of the exhibit reproductions of his infamous *Lysistrata* drawings were deemed obscene, and seized by the outraged London police.

The grand narrative

David Gress From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents. The Free Press, 610 pages, $28

reviewed by James Bowman

Not the least important insight of David Gress's frequently important and always useful book is that the cultural vandals who have been taking their little hatchets to the idea of "Western Civilization" for the past thirty years or so have been powerfully aided by the overweening of that idea's advocates and champions. Influenced by America's civic religion and the tradition of the mythologizing of the Founding Fathers, they invented what Mr. Gress calls the "Grand Narrative" of Western civilization based on a "Magic Moment" theory of historiography. The first and paradigmatic Magic Moment for these theorists was the discovery (as they imagined it) by the ancient Greeks of the abstract principles of democracy and individual liberty. History since then can be summed up as the loss and rediscovery of these principles in further Magic Moments, such as the Enlightenment or the founding of the American Republic, and also in a series of "Great Books" wrenched from their historical contexts.

This simpleminded compendium of history, ironically summarized in Mr. Gress's title, was created to meet the twin demands of Cold War propaganda and the postwar democratization of American higher education. But it was always going to be an easy mark for unruly students—or, nowadays, unruly professors—flushed with the shocking and permanently disillusioning discovery that, say, both the Greeks and the Founding Fathers owned slaves. Moreover, although Gress doesn't go into this, it also encouraged those same students and professors in an increasingly silly pursuit through pre-history of some Magic Moment of their own—some "paradise" (to use Kirkpatrick Sale's word) lost to "Western" patriarchy and capitalism and imperialism wherein gentle and pacific and environmentally aware Native Americans, or Africans, or women, ruled the earth.

Mr. Gress is commendably ruthless with all such nonsense. The first sentence of his introduction throws down the gauntlet: "Liberty grew because it served the interests of power." So much for the mythology of the American state! But so much, too, for the daughter-mythologies now so popular among American academics and inclining, like their original, to a dangerous sort of millennarianism, an illusion that "true democracy lay ahead, not here and now. It thus became a future-oriented search for justice, whereas democracy was in fact an old practice in the niches of liberty, and one impossible to explain apart from the Christian ethnicity of the Old Western synthesis." This synthesis, more Roman than Greek and more Medieval than Renaissance, he spends much of the rest of this comprehensively learned volume discussing.

Though Mr. Gress is himself Danish, he approaches his subject *à l'Americaine* by making it essentially a matter of pedagogy. It is surely significant, though of what I don't know, that so much of American political conflict has been and continues to be about what shall be taught to the poor captive inmates of our nationalized educational system. But if what is being taught in our

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universities is some sort of ideological parody of history, either of the left (vulgar Marxism) or of the right (the Whiggish Grand Narrative) which, in their superficiality, often amount to mirror images of each other, that is an educational and a social problem, not an intellectual one. What we ought to be asking is not why this particular claptrap is being taught in our universities but why we have such appallingly poor universities that claptrap of any sort can be taught there without remark by the culture at large. And the answer to this question lies in the corruption of our intellectual life by ideology.

It is telling that Gress quotes as an epigraph to his second chapter A. E. Housman's remark that "It appears then that upon the majority of mankind the classics can hardly be said to exert the transforming influence which is claimed for them." It is not clear to me that Gress quite appreciates the complex irony that Housman intended, since not only was no "majority of mankind" ever exposed to the classics in the first place—rather the reverse, in fact—but also "the transforming influence" of their study was the invention of pedagogical moralists engaged, precisely as the retailers of the Grand Narrative were a generation or two later, in an effort not of scholarship but of salesmanship.

With the state takeover of education at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, educators had to make up reasons why it was for the public good that they continued to do what they had always done. When the reasons why studying the classics was a morally improving exercise began to look to steely-eyed education bureaucrats as threadbare as old classicists like Housman surely always knew they were, the classics were jettisoned and the Grand Narrative, with a grand new set of moral arguments for its utility (incorporating, as Gress acknowledges, various rags of the old moralism on behalf of the classics), was put in its place. But Housman's derisive account of the old moral argument should certainly not be used to reflect on the subject that he loved, as all academic subjects should be loved, for its own sake. In that respect, the classics and the Grand Narrative are not on all fours with each other. The one is a discipline of study; the other is at best a public relations exercise, at worst an ideology.

Though I liked this book very much, I sometimes wondered if its author quite realized what he was opposed to in writing it. Immersed as he is in the history he is trying to correct, he does not see that the real enemy is not merely historical error but also contempt for the study of history itself. The mistakes of the last fifty years are not a result of well-intentioned incompetence, but have been committed deliberately by ideologues on left or right for whom history exists only to be useful to some political program. This lamentable state of affairs is also contributed to by the popular culture—which, in its middlebrow and lowbrow forms, has always insisted on the reduction of knowledge of all kinds to formulae (hence the "Great Books" and the much-fought-over "canon") and in its nobrow form insists on reserving the years when Greek and Latin are commonly learned, if they are learned at all, for play rather than work or scholarship.

The Grand Narrative and its principal identifiable theorist, Will Durant, are thus rather an Aunt Sally, set up just to be knocked down again and again for creating "an idealized vision of Greece seen through the lens of a West defined as the heir of that idealized Greece." As a result, they are said to have misunderstood the period between the Greeks and our own time as "a long preamble to modernity" which was "not appreciated as an authentic and valid form of Western identity." Doubtless there were foolish boosters of the Grand Narrative who so regarded the last 2500 years of history, but there were also a great many historians—almost all of them, I suspect—who would have been embarrassed by any such point of view. True, the grand narrative was structural and therefore extremely important once "Western Civ" became the foun-

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dation of the humanities curriculum, but this is a problem of politics and education and not historiography, and treating it as the latter, like taking poor Will Durant as the representative figure of American historiography, confers upon it a dignity it does not deserve. By the last chapter, Mr. Gress is taking the time laboriously to dispute with the likes of Kirkpatrick Sale, Paul Ehrlich, James Lovelock, and even, God help us, Al Gore as though they were foes worthy his lance.

Mr. Gress's inability to leave any argument unanswered mars what is otherwise a splendid work of intellectual history and makes it extremely difficult at times to follow the thread of his own argument. Leaping like a mountain goat from crag to crag, he gives us capsule summaries of a huge range of historical, economic, sociological, religious, and philosophical thought. In the forty-six pages of chapter seven, for example, he takes us from Pico della Mirandola to Goethe to Voltaire to Max Weber, back to Pico, to Luther to North and Thomas's *Rise of the Western World* (1973), back to Max Weber, to Hume (the essay on "Superstition and Enthusiasm") to the Jansenists to Armand de Rancé, the seventeenth-century founder of the Trappist order and his quarrel about monasticism with Jean Mabillon, to Edward Whiting Fox's *History in Geographic Perspective: The Other France* (1971) to Eric Jones's *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (1981) to Montesquieu, to Voltaire again, forward to Michelet, backward to Rousseau, back again to Montesquieu, forward to Madison, and ending with Burke.

Nor is that all. Along the way he manages to tell in essence the stories of the Protestant Reformation, the Elizabethan succession, the Spanish Armada, the English Civil War, the Thirty Years War, the Fronde, the monastic revival, the unprecedented growth of Western European economies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and to quote a poem by Klopstock which provides an excellently apposite and sardonic comment on this whole history. It is brilliant, a tour de force of historical writing, but just occasionally the reader is brought up short by the suspicion that what Gress is creating is yet another historical compendium, an epitome, a Great Books program reduced to a single book, a sort of prospectus for another Grand Narrative which will leave in the stuff, mainly to do with the Germanic heroic ideal, left out by the original. I am in complete sympathy with him about the Germanic heroism, but at times I wished he had arranged his book, as it is encyclopedic in scope, in encyclopedic form.

The wheel turns

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn November 1916:
The Red Wheel/Knot II.
Translated by H. T. Willetts.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1010 pages, $35

reviewed by Daniel J. Mahoney

Nearly sixteen years after its publication in Russian and more than a decade after it appeared in a French translation, the second "knot" of *The Red Wheel*, Solzhenitsyn's multivolume epic on the events leading up to the revolutionary cataclysm of 1917, has at last appeared in English. Though the work as a whole remains unknown in this country, a consensus has developed, in sharp contrast to its enthusiastic critical reception in France, that *The Red Wheel*, Solzhenitsyn's great literary and intellectual endeavor of the last thirty years, is a failure, and a failure of monumental proportions.

Many critics are thus predisposed to pronounce it dead on arrival, following the lead of Solzhenitsyn's most recent biographer, D. M. Thomas, and the even more authoritative Michael Scammell, whose ostensibly balanced 1984 biography played a critical role in undermining Solzhenitsyn's reputation in elite, liberal, and academic circles in

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the United States.[1] In *Invisible Allies* (1995), Solzhenitsyn himself dates his breach with the secular Russian intelligentsia to the publication (of the first version) of *August 1914* in the West in 1972; at a stroke the heroic, anti-Stalinist Nobel Laureate became suspiciously conservative and was ridiculed for patriotic and Christian sentiments unbecoming a genuinely modern thinker and artist. While neither the original 1972 version of *August 1914* nor the augmented version (published in English translation in 1989) was as critically well received as Solzhenitsyn's classic novels of the 1960's—*The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*—the coup de grâce for Solzhenitsyn's reputation in the West was undeniably his June 1978 commencement address at Harvard, "A World Split Apart."

Even though one would never have discerned it from press or scholarly accounts of that now infamous address, Solzhenitsyn's efforts in that speech to separate the necessary and salutary defense of the spiritual traditions and free political institutions of the West from the "anthropocentric humanism" of the most radical (and self-conscious) currents of the Enlightenment have been the hallmark of the greatest conservative-minded political philosophy of the twentieth century. Instead of forthrightly confronting Solzhenitsyn's arguments, it was easier and undoubtedly more pleasurable to caricature them. Solzhenitsyn thus became a legend, at worst an anti-Semite and apologist for Tsarist despotism, at best an illiberal crank yearning for an agrarian utopia and the supposed spiritual contentment of the Middle Ages (calumnies recently revived by George Steiner in *The New York Times Book Review*). It became obligatory to call Solzhenitsyn a pan-Slavist nationalist and "Slavophile" even though the author and his fictional hero in *The Red Wheel*, Colonel Georgi Vorotyntsev, are unremitting critics of what Solzhenitsyn has called the "messianic exclusiveness" to which the pan-Slavists and even the great Dostoevsky were prone. In *November 1916*, Solzhenitsyn writes about the gradual marginalization of D. M. Shipov, the great zemstvo (local, self-governing councils of the late Tsarist period) leader who sought to avoid a deadly confrontation between state and society. Shipov believed that Russia must find her own path to liberty, prudently melding constitutionalism and Russia's distinctive spiritual heritage. Like the author of *The Red Wheel*, Shipov was routinely called a Slavophile, "although he did not recognize either the divine origin of absolutism or the superiority of Orthodoxy to other forms of Christianity—but it had become the custom half a century earlier (and remained so half a century later) to call anyone who chooses to deviate from direct imitation of Western models . . . a reactionary, a Slavophile."

November 1916 is not a book for everyone, not even for those who have faithfully followed Solzhenitsyn's major works to date. The "knots" of *The Red Wheel* are what the author calls "narrative(s) in discrete periods of time" and are intended to capture certain crucial moments that reveal the nature of the approaching revolutionary juggernaut. They are huge, sprawling books, novelistic only in a qualified and idiosyncratic sense. They are "polyphonic" works (to use Solzhenitsyn's own description) which allow dozens of characters (including those Solzhenitsyn clearly has no sympathy for, such as Lenin) to speak from their own points of view, although the author doesn't hesitate to speak in his own voice, particularly in the more historical chapters. The volumes of *The Red Wheel* lack the compactness of Solzhenitsyn's best known novels and the movement from historical-political analyses to the fictional representation of its heroes such as Sanya Lazhenitsyn (a thinly dis-

1 For the definitive account of the reception of Solzhenitsyn's work in the United States, see Edward E. Ericson, Jr.'s *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Regnery 1993) as well as his article "Solzhenitsyn's Western Reception Since 1991" in *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars* (Vol. 29, 1999).

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guised version of Solzhenitsyn's father) and Vorotyntsev will undoubtedly distract those who have no real interest in the political and spiritual fate of Russia or in the Bolshevik revolution. But for those who truly share Solzhenitsyn's desire to understand the underlying causes and ultimate meaning of 1917, for those who are not just looking for another "entertaining" novel to read but have the discipline to confront an artful, Thucydidean mixture of politics, philosophy, and literature at the service of historical truth, this book has the force of a revelation.

By concentrating on the superficial quiescence of the period from October 27 to November 16, 1916, Solzhenitsyn allows his readers to see the mutually reinforcing corruption of Russian state and society as well as the absence of any statesmanlike figures who might have helped stem the revolutionary tide. In *August 1914*, Solzhenitsyn created a remarkable portrait of the statesman Pyotr Stolypin, scourge of the revolutionary left and reactionary right alike and the last best hope, according to Solzhenitsyn, for Russia's salvation. In *November 1916*, the reader feels the gaping nonpresence of Stolypin (even Tsar Nikolai II seems momentarily to feel the loss of the great man and statesman). Those moderate and patriotic figures who, broadly speaking, shared Stolypin's desire for reform without revolution, lack the judgment and finesse or a sufficient position of responsibility to make a real difference. The book is strewn with sympathetic figures, from the spiritually sensitive Sanya Lazhenitsyn to the army chaplain Father Severyan (who seems to speak for Solzhenitsyn when he criticizes Tolstoy's "Voltairian" humanitarianism) to the profound but hapless Shipov, who shares many of Stolypin's political ideas but lacks his fortitude and his nuanced appreciation of the limits of abstract moralism in politics. Above all, there is the fictional Vorotyntsev, demoted to an isolated front and still a colonel late in the war. As the readers of *August 1914* will remember, Vorotyntsev had the temerity to defend General Samsonov after the disastrous Battle of Tannenberg when the regime was looking for scapegoats to blame for its generalized corruption and incompetence.

Vorotyntsev is the fictional hero of *The Red Wheel*, Stolypin its historical one. Vorotyntsev clearly represents the best of modern Russia. He is patriotic and religious-minded and a military strategist of some note, but with wide scientific interests and a keen appreciation of the need to reform radically a deeply sclerotic regime. Personally and intellectually, he blends tradition and modernity. During the time in question, he is on leave in Petersburg and Moscow and actively pursues the prospects with Guchkov, head of the Octobrist opposition party, of a "palace revolution" against the inept Tsar, a revolution aiming to save, not destroy, the monarchy and regime. In the process of his conversations and investigations he discovers to his consternation the multiplying signs of approaching revolution.

Vorotyntsev, speaking for Solzhenitsyn himself, has arrived at the conclusion that Russia's continued involvement in World War I can only undermine the confidence of the Russian people in their ineffectual regime. He is increasingly sympathetic to the "treasonous" possibility of a "separate peace" with Germany. He is nearly desperate to act, to do something, *anything* to save his beloved Russia. But he is distracted by marital problems with his wife Alina and by a dizzying and life-restoring affair with the remarkable historian Olda Andozerskaya whom he meets at a Petersburg dinner party. Olda's striking blend of femininity and independent-mindedness (in the company of fashionable society she dares defend the superiority of constitutional monarchy, even law-abiding autocracy, over republicanism and socialism in all their forms) immediately wins Vorotyntsev's heart. But it also deflects him from the path of personal and political obligation. Vorotyntsev's infidelity, and the personal crisis that accompanies it, mirrors Russia's spiritual and

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political crisis. In the penultimate chapter, his moving expression of regret for the deep harm he has caused Alina suggests the need that Russia has for spiritual healing on the eve of her confrontation with the abyss.

In its symbolism and sensibility, *November 1916* is perhaps the most Christian of Solzhenitsyn's books, though it is never didactic or sectarian. Sanya and Father Severyan do not hesitate to criticize the Orthodox Church for its complicity in the persecution of the Old Believers and Vorotyntsev is critical of the senseless oppression of the Jews. But Solzhenitsyn is convinced that the Church, freed from slavish attachment to the state, can play a particularly vital role in the spiritual regeneration of Russia. In the moving final chapter a forlorn woman, Zina, who has had a disastrous affair and a child out of wedlock, and whose self-preoccupation has contributed indirectly to the death of her child, finds herself drawn ineluctably to an Orthodox Church. There, through the act of confession, she begins to experience unconditional forgiveness. As the political philosopher David Walsh has suggested, the impetuous Zina seems to symbolize Russia herself in her agony and need for divine solace. In this book, Solzhenitsyn never loses sight of the spiritual nature of the crisis that continues to afflict Russia.

One salient dimension of that crisis, on constant display in *November 1916,* is the moral and political corruption of the intellectuals. The Russian intellectual class might have played a salutary social role by contributing to the gradual liberalization and modernization of Russian state and society, but instead it largely became a "subversive," even nihilistic, force. Solzhenitsyn's unmistakable hostility to the juvenile leftism of the pre-Revolutionary Russian intelligentsia has greatly damaged his reputation among "liberals" in Russia today. In contrast to them, he believes that the first, ostensibly democratic, Russian revolution of March 1917 marks the crucial event in the spiritual and political decomposition of Russia. In Solzhenitsyn's view, the liberals were incapable of governing or acting in a politically responsible way.

Several of *November 1916*'s "historical" chapters offer probing and polemical analyses of Russian liberalism, especially the left-leaning Constitutional Democratic, or Kadet, party and the so-called "Progressive Bloc" within the last Duma, the Tsarist parliament. Seven chapters focus on Lenin, plotting and quarreling with Parvus and fantastically planning for the outbreak of proletarian revolution in that bastion of bourgeois repression, Switzerland! (Some historians, such as the great biographer of Stalin, the ex-Communist Boris Souvarine, questioned the historical accuracy of Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Lenin while others, including Robert Conquest, applauded his skillful artistic rendition of Lenin's monstrous attachment to revolution at all costs. These interpretations are, of course, not necessarily mutually exclusive.) Since these chapters have already appeared in *Lenin in Zurich*, let me conclude by highlighting Solzhenitsyn's searing indictment of Russian liberalism, an indictment all the more important since the Russian liberals became the founders of the provisional government of 1917 and are the prototype of contemporary Russian "westernizing" intellectuals.

Solzhenitsyn never attacks the Kadets for being liberal per se. Instead, he criticizes them for being "not in fact really liberal" at all. In the great conflict between a reactionary state and the revolutionary left, the liberals always managed "to caress the left," Solzhenitsyn notes. He continues: "their sympathies always with the left, their feet are capable of shuffling only leftward, their heads bob busily as they listen to leftist arguments—but they feel disgraced if they take a step to or listen to a word from the right." For Solzhenitsyn, it is clear that indulging the left is not a peculiarity or monopoly of Russian liberalism.

The Red Wheel establishes with great eloquence and luminous clarity (reinforced by H. T. Willett's superb translation) that Russia desperately needed a politics of the

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realistic and principled center to overcome the blindness of the imperial authorities as well as the nihilistic impatience and destructiveness of the revolutionary left. The conflict between state and society, marked by "mutual distrust, animosity, hatred," was drawing "Russia toward the abyss." Statesmen such as Stolypin and, to a lesser extent, Guchkov, who courageously supported the suppression of revolutionary terror even as they encouraged extensive land reform, a responsible system of representation, and the rule of law, were despised by the liberals who should have recognized in them Russia's and liberalism's salvation. *November 1916* is finally a defense of civic courage and moderation, of an authentic liberalism that can see enemies on the left as well as the right.

In one of the book's most memorable formulations, Solzhenitsyn observes the difficulty of pursuing "a middle line" of social development, particularly in an age of ideological politics. "The loud mouth, the big fist, the bomb, the prison bars are of no help to you, as they are to those at the two extremes. Following the middle line demands the utmost self-control, the most inflexible courage, the most patient calculation, the most precise knowledge."

Undoubtedly, the herd of independent minds will divide between those who dismiss this message as "Slavophile" and those who find it boring. It is, in fact, as old, and as universal in import, as Aristotle's *Politics*. *November 1916*, a very Russian book, reminds us that the searching exploration of the particular provides the best access to universal truth. It shows us, quite palpably, that the destinies of Russia and the West inexorably intertwine.

Book notes

Nirad C. Chaudhuri Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse.
Oxford, 137 pages, $15.95; $8.95 paper

Nirad Chaudhuri is the author of two of the greatest books to have come out of the Anglo-Indian encounter, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* Together these memoirs tell three interlocking stories. First, how a brilliant, book-loving boy from rural Bengal, born in 1897, the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, was classically educated in English and Bengali among the Westernized Hindu elite of Calcutta. Second, how the world of this elite, the vigorous Bengali *bhadralok*, was destroyed by Ghandi's xenophobic nationalism and by the British withdrawal from India, a catastrophe to which Chaudhuri, as a journalist and intimate of Indian politicians, was a pained and privileged eyewitness. (Chaudhuri dedicated the *Autobiography* "to the memory of the British Empire in India," because—and the words have made him anathema to anti-colonialists everywhere—"all that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by . . . British rule.") Third, how all of Western civilization, at high noon at the moment his birth, has in the course of his lifetime set like the sun, and how the personal experience of this sudden descent, and his lifelong literary protest against it, have made him "feel like a heretic being burnt at the stake, but without release from the torture by death."

The *Autobiography* was published in 1951, when Chaudhuri was fifty-four; *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* in 1987, when he was ninety. Now, at the phenomenal age of 101, Chaudhuri has published a kind of coda to these books, a prophetic and mordantly aphoristic essay on contemporary decadence. He has found no solace in old age: for him the flames have only grown higher, and the present become a ghastly pyre-lit foreground, "empty with nothingness in it." The Night of Time has spread out against the sky, its chariot drawn by Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse, *individualism* (i.e., unrestrained self-indulgence), *nationalism* (militant race-pride), and *democracy* (leveling egalitarianism and contempt for human greatness). Circe, in the form of an American pop diva, presides over all, subjugating the world mind with the wine of a

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degraded culture. The West, a used-up old man, his creative powers exhausted, approaches the end not "in his bed, full of years and honors," but "in a brothel, suffering from delirium tremens," begging for deliverance by the Fourth Horseman, *death*.

Chaudhuri's examples of contemporary decadence—in India, England, and the United States; in government, religion, education, and manners—are vivid and apt. His language and imagery are an improbably beautiful fusion of the Elizabethan Bible, the Gilbert Murray classics, and the evening news. His diction is precise, and when he speaks of "decadence" and "civilization" and other abstract nouns, he takes great pains to define his terms. The clarity, force, and poetry of Chaudhuri's pessimism is powerful, more powerful even than that of Henry Adams. As with Adams's *Letter to American Teachers of History*, the only literary work to which it can be compared, Chaudhuri's polemic could easily be laughed off as mere pathetic fallacy—as an angry man's projection of his own imminent demise, and the death of the world that made him, upon the universe. It could . . . but only by those who have accepted decadence as the normal condition of human life. Those who have not will find nothing to laugh at here. Neither will they find any comfort.

Philip Hamburger
Friends Talking in the Night:
Sixty Years of Writing for "The New Yorker."
Knopf, 424 pages, $30

In 1939 Philip Hamburger, then twenty-five and fresh from the Columbia School of Journalism, joined the staff of *The New Yorker*. Harold Ross put him on The Talk of the Town, where, Hamburger writes, "he made it clear that, above all, he was looking for *content* laced with humor." This Hamburger gave him—not only for Talk but also for Profiles, Notes & Comment, and a dozen other departments—and he gives it to the magazine still. *Friends Talking in the Night* is Hamburger's own choice from his life's work, ninety-four pieces spanning sixty years, from his very first months on the job (a sketch of Dr. Otto Bettmann, founder of the eponymous archive, "whose fastest-moving item [in '39] is Umbrellas; he thinks Chamberlain is responsible for that") all the way down to last summer (a visit with Al Hirschfeld, who's still drawing at age ninety-five, and who "uses the word 'retire' the way some people pronounce 'Richard Nixon'").

Hamburger, who has always made his own assignments, has proven himself to be one of the magazine's most versatile, inquisitive, and far-reaching reporters. When at home in Manhattan—which is not all that often—he writes about old mayors and delicatessen waiters, about dog shows and carrier pigeons and the labyrinthine package-delivery system inside the walls of Macy's. When writing his series "Notes for a Gazetteer," he looks hard at small-town America, from the copper mines of Butte, Montana, to the spas of Hot Springs, Arkansas, and, unlike those social critics who argue that the country is now an undifferentiated whole, he finds each place he visits more foreign than the last, "never the same realities or the same dreams or the same yesterdays or the same todays." He seeks out the company of judges, and presidents, and writers. He loves art, music, and the theater, and he possesses what he calls "a deeply felt amateur appreciation" of these things, which is a modest way of saying that, though he isn't a scholar and cannot read a score, he can write extremely well about his own experience of beauty.

But lest anyone think that Hamburger concerns himself only with the smiling aspects of life, special mention must be made of perhaps his best work—his chilling reports from Europe and South America just after World War Two. He was in Rome on April 29, 1945, and saw Mussolini and some of the other Fascists "dangling by their heels from a rusty beam in front of a gas station" on the Piazza Loreto. He walked through the ruins of Hitler's house at Berchtesgaden, "a grotesque and instruc-

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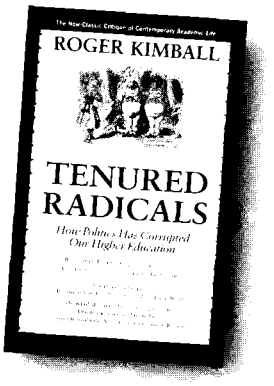

Since *Tenured Radicals* first appeared in 1990, it has achieved a stature as the leading critique of the ways in which the humanities are now taught and studied in American universities. Trenchant and witty, it lays bare the sham of what now passes for serious academic pursuit in too many circles. In this new edition, completely reset, Roger Kimball has brought the text up to date and added a new Introduction. Those who have never read *Tenured Radicals* are in for a treat; others may find a second reading worth their while."Mr. Kimball names his enemies precisely.... This book will breed fistfights."—Roger Rosenblatt, *New York Times Book Review.*
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tive heap of rubbish," and made an unforgettable catalogue of the kitsch he found there. And in Buenos Aires, in 1948, he interviewed Juan Perón, who wore "a brown Palm Beach suit" and sucked on hard candy and spoke of how education in Argentina must be reformed. "This is not a matter of putting my own people into the universities," Perón explained. "It is a matter of getting politics out of the universities."

In a profile of Vartan Gregorian, Hamburger wrote that, "in a library, one thing leads to another, and each point of reference becomes an act of discovery, an extension of one's own horizons." This is true, and not only in a library but in life—that is, if one is as open to the joys of discovery as is Philip Hamburger. To read this big book of his, and to follow his mind as one thing leads to another, is to extend one's own horizons. It is also, in these times dominated by exposé, muckraking, and sour, unconsidered opinion, to extend one's ideas about what a fundamentally humane journalism—*content* laced with humor, *the facts* reported with compassion—can achieve in the hands of a master.

Jeremy Lewis Cyril Connolly: A Life.
Jonathan Cape/Pimlico,
653 pages, $50; $19.95 paper

To the writer Cyril Connolly, his own flawed character was a limitless literary goldmine, a dark gift beyond measure. In *Enemies of Promise* (1938) and *The Unquiet Grave* (1945), his *sui generis* confessions-cum-self-lacerations, he wrote with wit and candor about his famous failings: snobbery, gluttony, nostalgia, cowardice, paralyzing perfectionism, and, above all, sloth. To Connolly the man, however, the selfsame character was an unmixed curse, and his clear-eyed knowledge of it the crux of his life. He loathed what he was, knew what he wanted to become, but lacked the will to change. He ached to deliver great books and perfect lyrics—the masterpieces that, since his boyhood days at Eton, he "knew" he had inside him—but he could not find

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"the obstruction which [was] blocking the flow from the well." He published a bad novel, the stagnant *Rock Pool* (1936), and talked away countless others. The rest, as his present biographer notes, was ephemeral literary journalism, but journalism "so permeated by his personality and his own experience that its glittering shards, when pieced together, form an ever-evolving autobiography." Connolly's writing was, in the words of his friend V. S. Pritchett, the compulsive "exposure of a temperament."

Since Connolly's death in 1974, many have tried to trace the contours of this temperament, and to explain to a younger generation how a writer who wrote so little, and complained so loudly about his inability to do more, could still be called (by Gerald Brenan) "the most brilliant mind in contemporary English literature." Many have also tried, with varying degrees of success, to evoke the living personality of this paradoxical man and the effect that his laughter and his melancholy, his generosity and his selfishness, his dazzling torrent of monologue and his frustrating trickle of prose, had on his contemporaries. Michael Shelden, in his brief and admirable *Friends of Promise* (1989), came closer than others in his vivid re-creation of the world of *Horizon*, the literary monthly which Connolly edited in the Forties and which many consider his most significant achievement. Now Jeremy Lewis has published the authorized life, a sort of standing figure to Shelden's bust. It's a splendid job, and a double rarity: a biography of a wit that is itself witty, and a long book that one wishes were still longer.

Lewis, a former director of Chatto & Windus and a onetime editor of *London Magazine*, brings many happy talents to the writing of this life, among them a flair for literary portraiture: his quick, nuanced sketches, such as those of Connolly's mentors Logan Pearsall Smith and Desmond MacCarthy, are remarkably deft. He also has a historian's feel for the climate of ideas through which Connolly moved—the intellectual air he breathed at Eton and Oxford, in Spain and London, in editors' dens and rich friends' country houses—and the ability to show how it sometimes invigorated, sometimes blighted his prose. He is a sensible, sensitive critic of Connolly's work, and he never lets his affection for the man get in the way of his judgment of the artist. Best of all, he is incapable of condescension, and instead shows his subject perfect empathy—a tough and loving humor and acceptance that never shades into strident censure or winking approval. Here at last is Connolly plain, in all his contradictions. He continues to hold our interest, and not only as one of the key figures of his literary generation, the wit who knew and helped and outraged almost everybody. Connolly, Lewis's good book reminds us, was a unique writer, one whose merciless understanding of his all-too-human shortcomings illuminates certain dark corners of our own selves, places we dare not approach except in his engaging company.

—*Christopher Carduff*

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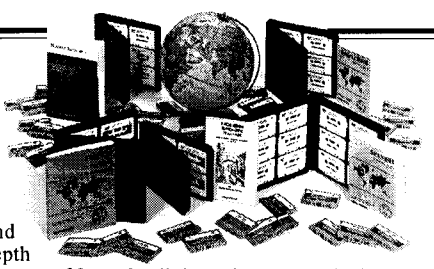

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